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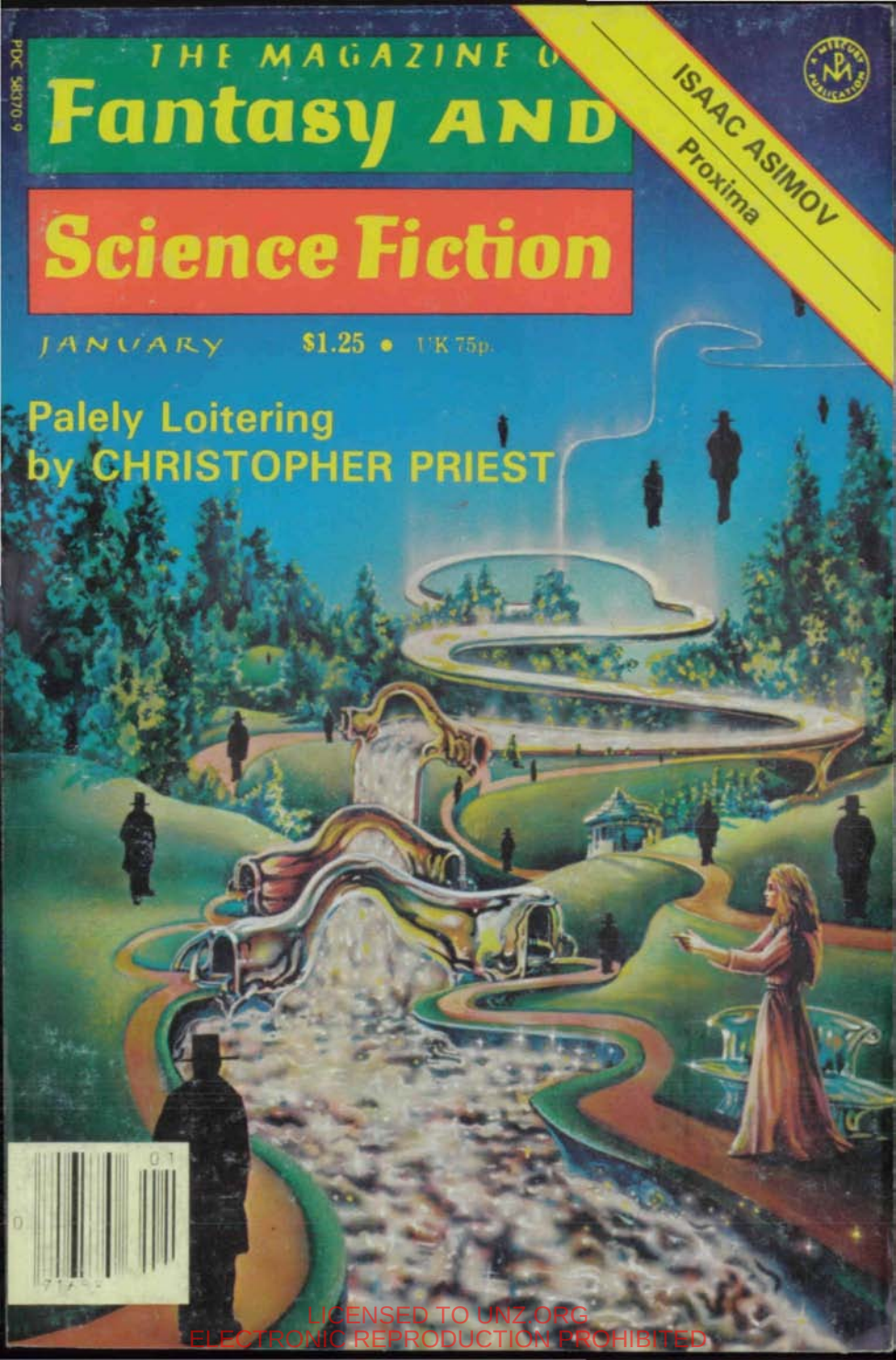
Palely Loitering
by CHRISTOPHER PRIEST



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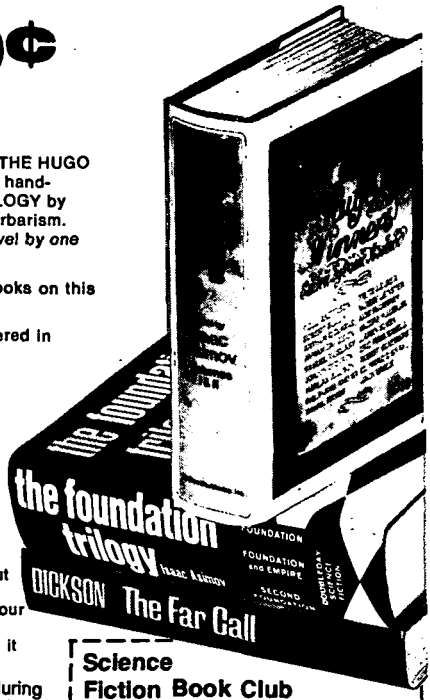

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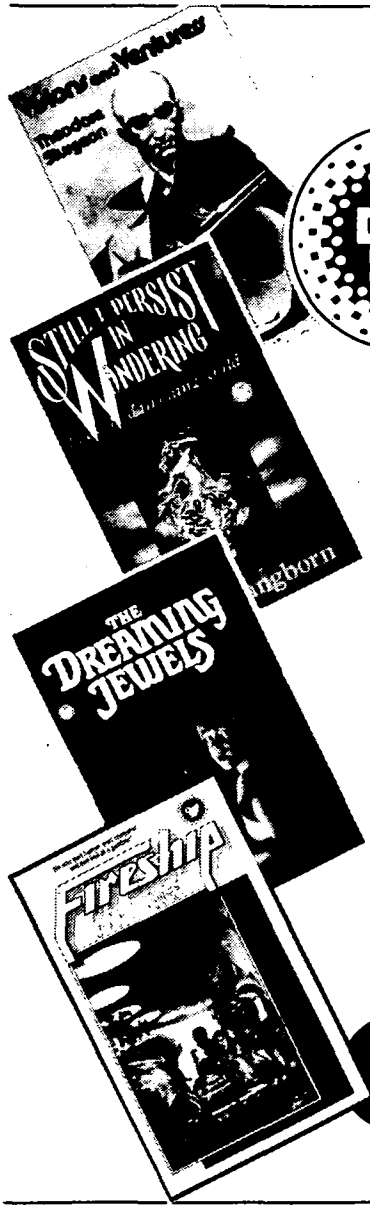

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Christopher Priest, who wrote "The Watched," (April 1978) returns with an unusual and evocative story about a young man who grows to adulthood in an era when starflight is a thing of the past and time travel is routine but confined to a Victorian like park.

Palely Loitering

by CHRISTOPHER PRIEST

During the summers of my childhood, the best treat of all was our annual picnic in Flux Channel Park, which lay some fifty miles from home. Because my father was set in his ways, and for him no picnic would be worthy of its name without a joint of freshly roasted cold ham, the first clue we children had was always therefore when Cook began her preparations. I made a point every day of slipping down unnoticed to the cellar to count the hams that hung from steel hooks in the ceiling, and as soon as I found one was missing I would hurry to my sisters and share the news. The next day, the house would fill with the rich aroma of ham roasting in cloves, and we three children would enter an elaborate charade: inside we would be brimming over with excitement at the thought of the adventure, but at the same time restraining ourselves to act normally, because Father's announcement of his plans at breakfast on the chosen day was an important part of the fun.

We grew up in awe and dread of our father, for he was a distant and strict man. Throughout the winter months, when his work made its greatest demands, we hardly saw him, and all we knew of him were the instructions passed on to us by Mother or the governor. In the summer months he chose to maintain the distance, joining us only for meals, and spending the evenings alone in his study. However, once a year my father would mellow, and for this alone the excursions to the Park would have been cause for joy. He

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knew the excitement the trip held for us and he played up to it, revealing the instinct of showman and actor.

Sometimes he would start by pretending to scold or punish us for some imaginary misdemeanor, or would ask Mother a misleading question, such as whether it was that day the servants were taking a holiday, or he would affect absent-mindedness; through all this we would hug our knees under the table, knowing what was to come. Then at last he would utter the magic words 'Flux Channel Park,' and, abandoning our charade with glee, we children would squeal with delight and run to Mother, the servants would bustle in and clear away the breakfast, there would be a clatter of dishes and the creak of the wicker hamper from the kitchen ... and at long last the crunching of hooves and steel-rimmed wheels would sound on the gravel drive outside, as the taxi-carriage arrived to take us to the station.

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I believe that my parents went to the Park from the year they were married, but my own first clear memory of a picnic is when I was seven years old. We went as a family every year until I was fifteen. For nine summers that I can remember, then, the picnic was the happiest day of the year, fusing in memory into one composite day, each picnic much like all the others, so carefully did Father orchestrate the treat for us. And yet one day stands out from all the others because of a moment of disobedience and mischief, and after that those summery days in Flux Channel Park were never quite the same again.

It happened when I was ten years old. The day had started like any other picnic-day, and by the time the taxi arrived the servants had gone on ahead to reserve a train-compartment for us. As we clambered into the carriage, Cook ran out of the house to wave us away, and she gave each of us children a freshly peeled raw carrot to gnaw on. I took mine whole into my mouth, distending my cheeks, and sucking and nibbling at it slowly, mashing it gradually into a juicy pulp. As we rattled down to the station I saw Father glancing at me once or twice, as if to tell me not to make so much noise with my mouth ... but it was a holiday from everything, and he said nothing.

My mother, sitting opposite us in the carriage, issued her usual instructions to my sisters. "Salleen," (my elder sister), "you're to keep an eye on Mykle. You know how he runs around." (I, sucking my carrot, made a face at Salleen, bulging a cheek with the carrot and

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squinting my eyes.) "And you, Therese, you must stay by me. None of you is to go too close to the Channel." Her instructions came too soon; the train-ride was of second-order interest, but it came between us and the Park.

I enjoyed the train, smelling the sooty smoke and watching the steam curl past the compartment window like an attendant white wraith, but my sisters, especially Salleen, were unaccustomed to the motion and felt sick. While Mother fussed over the girls, and summoned the servants from their compartment further down the train, Father and I sat gravely beside each other. When Salleen had been taken away down the train, and Therese had quietened, I started to fidget in my seat, craning my neck to peer forward, seeking that first magical glimpse of the silvery ribbon of the Channel.

"Father, which bridge shall we cross this time?" And "Can we cross *two* bridges today, like last year?"

Always the same answer: "We shall decide when we arrive. Keep still, Mykle."

And so we arrived, tugging at our parents' hands to hurry them, waiting anxiously by the gate as the entrance-fees were paid. The first dashing run down the sloping green sward of the Park grounds, dodging the trees and jumping high to see along the Channel, shouting disappointment because there were too many people there already, or not enough. Father beamed at us and lit his pipe, flicking back the flaps of his frock-coat and thrusting his thumbs into his waistcoat, then strolled beside Mother as she held his arm. My sisters and I walked or ran, depending on our constitutional state, heading towards the Channel, but slowing when awed by its closeness, not daring to approach. Looking back, we saw Father and Mother waving to us from the shade of the trees, needlessly warning us of the dangers.

As always, we hurried to the toll-booths for the time-bridges that crossed the Channel, for it was these bridges that were the whole reason for the day's trip. A line of people was waiting at each booth, moving forward slowly to pay the entrance-fee: families like ourselves with children dancing, young couples holding hands, single men and women glancing speculatively at each other. We counted the people in each queue, eagerly checked the results with each other, then ran back to our parents.

"Father, there are only twenty-six people at the Tomorrow Bridge!"

"There's *no one* at the Yesterday Bridge!"

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"Can we cross into Tomorrow, Mother?"

"We did that last year." Salleen, still disgruntled from the train, kicked out feebly at me. "Mykle *always* wants to go to Tomorrow!"

"No I don't. The queue is longer for Yesterday!"

Mother, soothingly: "We'll decide after lunch. The queues will be shorter then."

Father, watching the servants laying our cloth beneath a dark old cedar tree, said: "Let us walk for a while, my dear. The children can come too. We will have luncheon in an hour or so."

Our second exploration of the Park was more orderly, conducted, as it was, under Father's eye. We walked again to the nearest part of the Channel — it seemed less risky now, with parents there — and followed one of the paths that ran parallel to the bank. We stared at the people on the other side.

"Father, are they in Yesterday or Tomorrow?"

"I can't say, Mykle. It could be either."

"They're nearer to the Yesterday Bridge, stupid!" Salleen, pushing me from behind.

"That doesn't mean anything, stupid!" Jabbing back at her with an elbow.

The sun reflecting from the silvery surface of the flux-fluid (we sometimes called it water, to my father's despair) made it glitter and sparkle like rippling quicksilver. Mother would not look at it, saying the reflections hurt her eyes, but there was always something dreadful about its presence so that no one could look too long. In the still patches, where the mystifying currents below briefly let the surface settle, we sometimes saw upside-down reflections of the people on the other side.

Later: we edged around the tolls, where the lines of people were longer than before, and walked further along the bank towards the east.

Then later: we returned to the shade and the trees, and sat in a demure group while lunch was served. My father carved the ham with the precision of the expert chef: one cut down at an angle towards the bone, another horizontally across to the bone, and the wedge of meat so produced taken away on a plate by one of the servants. Then the slow, meticulous carving beneath the notch; one slice after another, each one slightly wider and rounder than the one before.

As soon as lunch was finished we made our way to the toll-booths, and queued with the other people. There were always fewer people waiting at this time of the

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afternoon, a fact that surprised us but which our parents took for granted. This day we had chosen the Tomorrow Bridge; whatever the preferences we children expressed, Father always had the last word. It did not, however, prevent Salleen from sulking, nor me from letting her see the joys of victory.

This particular day was the first time I had been to the Park with any understanding of the Flux Channel and its real purpose. Earlier in the summer, the governor had instructed us in the rudiments of spatio-temporal physics ... although that was not the name he gave to it. My sisters had been bored with the subject (it was boys' stuff, they declared) but to learn how and why the Channel had been built was fascinating to me.

I had grown up with a general understanding that we lived in a world where our ancestors had built many marvelous things that we no longer used or had need for. This awareness, gleaned from the few other children I knew, was of astonishing and miraculous achievements, and was, as might be expected, wildly inaccurate. I knew as a fact, for instance, that the Flux Channel had been built in a matter of days, that jet-propelled aircraft could circumnavigate the world in a matter of minutes, and that houses and automobiles and railway-trains could be built in a matter of seconds. Of course the truth was quite different, and our education in the scientific age and its history was constantly interesting to me.

In the case of the Flux Channel, I knew by my tenth birthday that it had taken more than two decades to build, that its construction had cost many human lives, and that it had taxed the resources and intelligence of many different countries.

Furthermore, the principle on which it worked was well understood today, even though we had no use for it as it was intended.

We lived in the age of starflight, but by the time I was born mankind had long lost the desire to travel in space.

The governor had shown us a slowed-down film of the launching of the craft that had flown to the stars: the surface of the Flux Channel undulating as the starship was propelled through its deeps like a huge whale trying to navigate a canal; then the hump of its hull bursting through the surface in a shimmering spray of exploding foam, and the gushing wake sluicing over the banks of the Channel and vanishing instantaneously; then the actual launch, with the starship soaring into the sky, leaving a trail of brilliant droplets in the air behind it.

All this had taken place in un-

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der one-tenth of a second; anyone within twenty-five miles of the launch would have been killed by the shockwave, and it is said that the thunder of the starship's passage could be heard in every country of the Neuropean Union. Only the automatic high-speed cameras were there to witness the launching. The men and women who crewed the ship — their metabolic functions frozen for most of the flight — would not have felt the strain of such a tremendous acceleration even if they had been conscious; the flux-field distorted time and space, changed the nature of matter. The ship was launched at such a high relative velocity that by the time the technicians had returned to the Flux Channel it would have been outside the Solar System. By the time I was born, seventy years after this, the starship would have been ... who knows where?

Behind it, churning and eddying with temporal mystery, the Flux Channel lay across more than a hundred miles of the land, a scintillating, dazzling ribbon of light, like a slit in the world that looked towards another dimension.

There were no more starships after the first, and that one had never returned. When the disturbance of the launching had calmed to a degree where the flux-field was no longer a threat to human safety, the stations that tapped the electricity had been built along part of its banks. A few years later, when the flux-field had stabilized completely, the Park was designated in a country area, and the time-bridges were built.

One of these traversed the Channel at an angle of exactly ninety degrees, and to walk across it was no different from crossing any bridge across any ordinary river.

One bridge was built slightly obtuse of the right-angle, and to cross it was to climb the temporal gradient of the flux-field; when one emerged on the other side of the Channel, twenty-four hours had elapsed.

The third bridge was built slightly acute of the right-angle, and to cross to the other side was to walk twenty-four hours into the past.

Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow existed on the far side of the Flux Channel, and one could walk at will among them.

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While waiting in line at the toll-booth, we had another argument about Father's decision to cross into Tomorrow. The Park management had posted a board above the pay-desk, describing the weather conditions on the other side. There was wind, low cloud, sudden

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showers. My mother said that she did not wish to get wet; Salleen, watching me, quietly repeated that we had been to Tomorrow last year. I stayed quiet, looking across the Channel to the other side.

(Over there the weather seemed to be as it was here: a high, bright sky, hot sunshine. But what I could see was Today: yesterday's Tomorrow, tomorrow's Yesterday, today's Today.)

Behind us the queue was thinning as other, less hardy, people drifted away to the other bridges. I was content, because the only one that did not interest me was the Today Bridge, but to rub in my accidental victory I whispered to Salleen that the weather was good on the Yesterday side. She, in no mood for subtle perversity, kicked out at my shins and we squabbled stupidly as my father went to the toll.

He was an important man; I heard the attendant say: "But you shouldn't have waited, sir. We are honoured by your visit." He released the ratchet of the turnstile, and we filed through.

We entered the covered way of the bridge, a long dark tunnel of wood and metal, lit at intervals by dim incandescent lamps. I ran on ahead, feeling the familiar electric tingle over my body as I moved through the flux-field.

"Mykle! Stay with us!" My father, calling from behind.

I slowed obediently, and turned to wait. I saw the rest of the family coming towards me, and the outlines of their bodies were strangely diffused, an effect of the field on all who entered it. As they reached me, and thus came into the zone I was in, their shapes became sharply focused once more.

I let them pass me, and followed behind. Salleen, walking besides me, kicked out at my ankles.

"Why did you do that?"

"Because you're a little pig!"

I ignored her. We could see the end of the covered way ahead. It had become dark soon after we started crossing the bridge — a presage of the evening of the day we were leaving — but now daylight shone again, and I saw my parents and sisters silhouetted against the light. Therese, holding Mother's hand, took no notice of me, but Salleen, whom I secretly loved, strutted proudly behind Father, asserting her independence of me. Perhaps it was because of her, or perhaps it was that morning light shining down from the end of the tunnel, but I stayed still as the rest of the family went on.

I waved my hands, watching the fingertips blur as they moved across the flux-field, and then I walked on slowly. Because of the blurring my family were now almost invisible. Suddenly I was a

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little frightened, alone in the flux-field, and I hastened after them. I saw their ghostly shapes move into the daylight and out of sight (Salleen glanced back towards me), and I walked faster.

By the time I had reached the end of the covered way, the day had matured and the light was that of mid-afternoon; low clouds were scudding before a stiff wind. As a squall of rain swept by I sheltered in the bridge, and looked across the Park for the family. I saw them a short distance away, hurrying towards one of the pagoda-shaped shelters the Park authorities had built. Glancing at the sky I saw there was a large patch of blue not far away, and I knew the shower would be a short one. It was not cold, and I did not mind getting wet, but I hesitated before going out into the open. Why I stood there I do not now recall, but I had always had a childish delight in the sensation of the flux-field, and at the place where the covered way ends the bridge is still over a part of the Channel.

I stood by the edge of the bridge and looked down at the flux-field. Seen from directly above it closely resembled water, because it seemed to be clear (although the bottom could not be seen), and did not have the same metallic sheen or quicksilver property it had when viewed from the side. There were bright highlights on the surface, glinting as the fluid stirred, as if there were a film of oil across it.

My parents had reached the pagoda — whose colorful tiles and paintwork looked odd in this dismal rain — and they were squeezing in with the two girls, as other people made room for them; I could see my father's tall black hat, bobbing behind the crowd.

Salleen was looking back at me, perhaps envying my solitary state, and so I stuck out my tongue at her. I was showing off. I went to the edge of the bridge, where there was no guard-rail, and leaned precariously out above the fluid. The flux-field prickled around me. I saw Salleen tugging at Mother's arm, and Father took a step forward into the rain. I poised myself, and jumped towards the bank, flying above the few inches of the Channel between me and the ground. I heard a roaring in my ears, I was momentarily blinded, and the charge of the flux-field enveloped me like an electric cocoon.

I landed feet-first on the muddy bank, and looked around me as if nothing untoward had happened.

iv

Although I did not realize it at first, in leaping from the bridge and moving up through a part of

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the flux-field, I had travelled in time. It happened that I landed on a day in the future when the weather was as grey and blustery as on the day I had left, and so my first real awareness, when I looked up, was that the pagoda had suddenly emptied. I stared in horror across the parkland, not believing that my family could have vanished in the blink of an eye.

I started to run, stumbling and sliding on the slippery ground, and I felt a panicky terror and a dread of being abandoned. All the cockiness in me had gone. I sobbed as I ran, and when I reached the pagoda I was crying aloud, snivelling and wiping my nose and eyes on the sleeve of my jacket.

I went back to where I had landed, and saw the muddy impressions of my feet on the bank. From there I looked at the bridge, so tantalizingly close, and it was then that I realized what I had done, even though it was a dim understanding.

Something like my former mood came to me then, and a spirit of exploration came over me. After all, it was the first time I had ever been alone in the Park. I started to walk away from the bridge, following a tree-lined path that went along the Channel.

The day I had arrived in must have been a weekday in winter or early spring, because the trees were bare and there were very few people about. From this side of the Channel I could see that the toll-booths were open, but the only other people in the Park were a long way away.

For all this, it was still an adventure, and the awful thoughts about where I had arrived, or how I was to return, were put aside.

I walked a long way, enjoying the freedom of being able to explore this side without my family. When they were present it was as if I could only see what they pointed out, and walk where they chose. Now it was like being in the Park for the first time.

This pleasure, small and unpositive, soon palled. It was a cold day, and my light summer shoes began to feel sodden and heavy, chafing against my toes. The Park was not at all how I liked it to be. Part of the fun on a normal day was the atmosphere of shared daring, and mixing with people whom you knew did not all come from the same day. Once, my father, in a mood of exceptional capriciousness, had led us to and fro across the Today and Yesterday Bridges, showing us time-slipped images of himself which he had made on a visit to the Park the day before. Visitors to the Park often did such things, and during the holidays, when the big factories were closed, the Park would be full of shouting,

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laughing voices as carefully prepared jokes of this sort were played.

None of this was going on as I tramped along under the leaden sky; the future was for me as commonplace as a field.

I began to worry, wondering how I was to get back. I could imagine the wrath of my father, the tears of my mother, the endless jibes I would get from Salleen and Therese. I turned around and walked quickly back towards the bridges, forming a half-hearted plan to cross the Channel repeatedly, using the Tomorrow and Yesterday Bridges in turn, until I was back where I started.

I was running again, in danger of sobbing, when I saw a young man walking along the bank towards me. I would have paid no attention to him, but for the fact that when we were a short distance apart he sidestepped so that he was in front of me.

I slowed, regarded him incuriously, and went to walk around him ... but much to my surprise he called after me.

"Mykle! It is Mylke, isn't is?"

"How do you know my name?" I said, pausing and looking at him warily.

"I ... was looking for you. You've jumped forward in time, and don't know how to get back."

"Yes, but —"

"I'll show you how. It's easy."

We were facing each other now, and I was wondering who he was and how he knew me. There was something much too friendly about him. He was very tall and thin, and had the beginnings of a moustache darkening his lip. He seemed adult to me, but when he spoke it was with a hoarse, boyish falsetto.

I said: "It's all right thank you, sir. I can find my own way."

"By running across the bridges?"

"How did you know?"

"You'll never manage it, Mykle. When you jumped from the bridge you went a long way into the future. About thirty-two years."

"This is...?" I looked around at the Park, disbelieving what he said. "But it feels like —"

"Just Tomorrow. But it isn't. You've come a long way. Look over there." He pointed across the Channel, to the other side. "Do you see those houses? You've never seen those before, have you?"

There was an estate of new houses, built beyond the trees on the Park's perimeter. True, I hadn't noticed them before, but it proved nothing. I didn't find this very interesting, and I began to sidle away from him, wanting to get on with the business of working

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out how to get back.

"Thank you, sir. It was nice to meet you."

"Don't call me 'sir'," he said, laughing. "You've been taught to be polite to strangers, but you must know who *I* am."

"N-no...." Suddenly rather nervous of him, I walked quickly away, but he ran over and caught me by the arm.

"There's something I must show you," he said. "This is very important. Then I'll get you back to the bridge."

"Leave me alone!" I said loudly, quite frightened of him.

He took no notice of my protests, but walked me along the path beside the Channel. He was looking over my head, across the Channel, and I could not help noticing that whenever we passed a tree or a bush which cut off the view he would pause and look past it before going on. This continued until we were near the time-bridges again, when he came to a halt beside a huge sprawling rhododendron bush.

"Now," he said. "I want you to look. But don't let yourself be seen."

Crouching down with him, I peered around the edge of the bush. At first I could not imagine what it was I was supposed to be looking at, and thought it was more houses for my inspection. The estate did, in fact, continue all along the further edge of the Park, just visible beyond the trees.

"Do you see her?" He pointed, then ducked back. Following the direction, I saw a young woman sitting on a bench on the far side of the Channel.

"Who is she?" I said, although her small figure did not actually arouse much curiosity in me.

"The loveliest girl I have ever seen. She's always there, on that bench. She is waiting for her lover. She sits there every day, her heart filled with anguish and hope."

As he said this the young man's voice broke, as if with emotion, and I glanced up at him. His eyes were moist.

I peered again around the edge of the bush and looked at the girl, wondering what it was about her that produced this reaction. I could hardly see her, because she was huddled against the wind and had a shawl drawn over her hair. She was sitting to one side, facing towards the Tomorrow Bridge. To me, she was approximately as interesting as the houses, which is not to say very much, but she seemed important to the young man.

"Is she a friend of yours?" I said, turning back to him.

"No, not a friend, Mykle. A symbol. A token of the love that is in us all."

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"What is her name?" I said, not following this interpretation.

"Estyll. The most beautiful name in the world."

Estyll: I had never heard the name before, and I repeated it softly.

"How do you know this?" I said. "You say you —"

"Wait, Mykle. She will turn in a moment. You will see her face."

His hand was clasping my shoulder, as if we were old friends, and although I was still shy of him it assured me of his good intent. He was sharing something with me, something so important that I was honoured to be included.

Together we leaned forward again and looked clandestinely at her. By my ear, I heard my friend say her name, so softly that it was almost a whisper. A few moments passed, then, as if the time-vortex above the Channel had swept the word slowly across to her, she raised her head, shrugged back the shawl, and stood up. I was craning my neck to see her, but she turned away. I watched her walk up the slope of the Park grounds, towards the houses beyond the trees.

"Isn't she a beauty, Mykle?"

I was too young to understand him fully, so I said nothing. At that age, my only awareness of the other sex was that my sisters were temperamentally and physically different from me; I had yet to discover more interesting matters. In any event, I had barely caught a glimpse of Estyll's face.

The young man was evidently enraptured by the girl, and as we watched her move through the distant trees my attention was half on her, half on him.

"I should like to be the man she loves," he said at last.

"Do you ... love her, sir?"

"Love? What I feel is too noble to be contained in such a word." He looked down at me, and for an instant I was reminded of the haughty disdain that my father sometimes revealed when I did something stupid. "Love is for lovers, Mykle. *I* am a romantic, which is a far grander thing to be."

I was beginning to find my companion rather pompous and over-bearing, trying to involve me in his passions. I was an argumentative child, though, and could not resist pointing out a contradiction.

"But you said she *was* waiting for her lover," I said.

"Just a supposition."

"I think you are her lover, and won't admit it."

I used the word disparagingly, but it made him look at me thoughtfully. The drizzle was coming down again, a dank veil across the countryside. The young man stepped away suddenly; I think he had grown as tired of my company as I had of his.

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"I was going to show you how to get back," he said. "Come with me." He set off towards the bridge, and I went after him. "You'll have to go back the way you came. You jumped, didn't you?"

"That's right," I said, puffing a little. It was difficult keeping up with him.

As we reached the end of the bridge, the young man left the path and walked across the grass to the edge of the Channel. I held back, nervous of going too close again.

"Ah!" said the young man, peering down at the damp soil. "Look, Mykle ... these must be your footprints. This was where you landed."

I went forward warily, and stood just behind him.

"Put your feet in these marks, and jump towards the bridge."

Although the metal edge of the bridge was only an arm's length away from where we were standing, it seemed a formidable jump, especially as the bridge was higher than the bank. I pointed this out.

"I'll be behind you," the young man said. "You won't slip. Now ... look on the bridge. There's a scratch on the floor. Do you see it? You have to aim at that. Try to land with one foot on either side, and you'll be back where you started."

It all seemed rather unlikely. The part of the bridge he was pointing out was wet with rain, and looked slippery. If I landed badly I would fall; worse, I could slip backwards into the flux-fluid. Although I sensed that my new friend was right — that I could only get back by the way I had come — it did not *feel* right.

"Mykle, I know what you're thinking. But I made that mark. I've done it myself. Trust me."

I was thinking of my father and his wrath, so at last I stepped forward and put my feet in the squelching impressions I had made as I landed. Rainwater was oozing down the muddy bank towards the flux-field, but I noticed that as it dripped down to touch the fluid it suddenly leaped back, just like the droplets of whisky on the side of the glass my father drank in the evenings.

The young man took a grip on my belt, holding on so that I should not slip down into the Channel.

"I'll count to three, then you jump. I'll give you a shove. Are you ready?"

"I think so."

"You'll remember Estyll, won't you?"

I looked over my shoulder; his face was very close to mine.

"Yes, I'll remember her," I said, not meaning it.

"Right ... brace yourself. It's

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quite a hop from here. One...."

I saw the fluid of the Channel below me and to the side. It was glistening eerily in the grey light.

"...two...three...."

I jumped forward at the same instant as the young man gave me a hefty shove from behind. Instantly, I felt the electric crackle of the flux-field, I heard again the loud roaring in my ears, and there was a split-second of impenetrable blackness. My feet touched the edge of the time-bridge, and I tripped, sprawling forward on the floor. I slithered awkwardly against the legs of a man standing just there, and my face fetched up against a pair of shoes polished to a brilliant shine. I looked up.

There was my father, staring down at me in great surprise. All I can now remember of that frightful moment is his face glaring down at me, topped by his black, curly brimmed, stove-pipe hat. He seemed to be as tall as a mountain.

v

My father was not a man who saw the merit of short, sharp punishment, and I lived under the cloud of my misdeed for several weeks.

I felt that I had done what I had done in all innocence, and that the price I had to pay for it was too high; in our house, however, there was only one kind of justice, and that was Father's.

Although I had been in the future only about an hour of my subjective time, five or six hours had passed for my family, and it was twilight when I returned. This prolonged absence was the main reason for my father's anger, although if I had jumped thirty-two years, as my companion had informed me, an error of a few hours on the return journey was as nothing.

I was never called upon to explain myself; my father detested excuses.

Salleen and Therese were the only ones who asked what had happened, and I gave them a shortened account: I said that after I had jumped into the future, and realized what I had done, I explored the Park on my own and then jumped back. This was enough for them. I said nothing of the youth with the lofty sentiments, nor of the young lady who sat on the bench. (Salleen and Therese were thrilled enough that I had catapulted myself into the distant future, although my safe return did make the end of the story rather dull.)

Internally, I had mixed feelings about my adventure. I spent a lot of time on my own — part of my punishment was that I could only go into the playroom one evening a week, and had to study more diligently instead — and tried to work

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out the meaning of what I had seen.

The girl, Estyll, meant very little to me. She certainly had a place in my memory of that hour in the future, but because she was so fascinating to my companion I remembered her through him, and she became of secondary interest.

I thought about the young man a great deal. He had gone to such pains to make a friend of me, and to include me in his private thoughts, and yet I remembered him as an intrusive and unwelcome presence. I often thought of his husky voice intoning those grand opinions, and even from the disadvantage of my junior years, his callow figure —all gangly limbs, slicked-back hair and downy moustache — was a comical one. For a long time I wondered who he could be. Although the answer seems obvious in retrospect it was some years before I realized it, and whenever I was out in the town I would keep my eyes open in case we happened to meet.

My penance came to an end about three months after the picnic. This parole was never formally stated, but understood by all concerned. The occasion was a party our parents allowed us to have for some visiting cousins, and after that my misbehaviour was never again directly mentioned.

The following summer, when the time came around for another picnic in Flux Channel Park, my father interrupted our excited outpourings to deliver a short speech, reminding us that we must all stay together. This was said to us all, although Father gave me a sharp and meaningful look. It was a small, passing cloud, and it threw no shadow on the day. I was obedient and sensible throughout the picnic ... but as we walked through the Park in the gentle heat of the day, I did not forget to look out for my helpful friend, nor for his adored Estyll. I looked, and kept looking, but neither of them was there that day.

vi

When I was eleven I was sent to school for the first time. I had spent my formative years in a household where wealth and influence were taken for granted, and where the governor had taken a lenient view of my education. Thrown suddenly into the company of boys from all walks of life, I retreated behind a manner of arrogance and condescension. It took two years to be scorned and beaten out of this, but well before then I had developed a wholehearted loathing for education and all that went with it. I became, in short, a student who did not study, and a pupil whose dislike for his fellows was heartily reciprocated.

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I became an accomplished malingerer, and with the occasional connivance of one of the servants I could readily feign a convincing though unaccountable stomach-ailment, or develop infectious-looking rashes. Sometimes I would simply stay at home; more frequently, I would set off into the countryside on my bicycle and spend the whole day in pleasant musings.

On days like this I pursued my own form of education by reading, although this was by choice and not by compulsion. I eagerly read whatever novels and poetry I could lay my hands on: my preference in fiction was for adventure, and in poetry I soon discovered the romantics of the early nineteenth century, and the then much despised desolationists of two hundred years later. The stirring combinations of valor and unrequited love, of moral virtue and nostalgic wistfulness, struck deep into my soul and made more pointed my dislike of the routines of school.

It was at this time, when my reading was arousing passions that my humdrum existence could not satisfy, that my thoughts turned to the girl called Estyll.

I needed an object for the stirrings within me. I envied the romantic poets their soulful yearnings, for they, it seemed to me, had at least had the emotional experience with which to focus their desires; the despairing desolationists, lamenting the waste around them, at least had known life. Perhaps I did not rationalize this need quite so neatly at the time, but whenever I was aroused by my reading, it was the image of Estyll that came most readily to mind.

Remembering what my companion had told me, and with my own sight of that small, huddled figure, I saw her as a lonely, heart-broken waif, squandering her life in a hopeless vigil. That she was unspeakably beautiful, and utterly faithful, went without saying.

As I grew older, my restlessness advanced. I felt increasingly isolated, not only from the other boys at school, but also from my family. My father's work was making more demands on him than ever before, and he was unapproachable. My sisteres were going their own separate ways: Therese had developed an interest in ponies, Salleen in young men. Nobody had time for me, no one tried to understand.

One autumn, some three or four years after I started school, I surrendered at last to the stirrings of soul and flesh, and attempted to allay them.

vii

I selected the day with care, one when there were several lessons at

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school where my absence would not be too obvious. I left home at the usual time in the morning, but instead of heading for school I rode to the city, bought a return ticket to the Park at the railway-station, and settled down on the train.

During the summer there had been the usual family outing to the Park, but it had meant little to me. I had outgrown the immediate future; Tomorrow no longer concerned me.

I was vested with purpose. When I arrived at the Park on that stolen day I went directly to the Tomorrow Bridge, paid the toll, and set off through the covered way towards the other side. There were more people about than I had expected, but it was quiet enough for what I wanted to do. I waited until I was the only one on the bridge, then went to the end of the covered way and stood by the spot from which I had first jumped. I took a flint from my pocket, and scratched a thin but deep line in the metal surface of the bridge.

I slipped the flint back in my pocket, then looked appraisingly at the bank below. I had no way of knowing how far to jump, only an instinct and a vague memory of how I had done it before. The temptation was to jump as far as possible, but I managed to suppress it.

I placed my feet astride the line, took a deep breath ... and launched myself towards the bank.

A dizzying surge of electric tingling, momentary darkness, and I sprawled across the bank.

Before I took stock of my surroundings I marked the place where I had landed. First I scraped a deep line in the soil and grass with the flint, pointing back towards the mark on the bridge (which was still visible, though less bright), then I tore away several tufts of grass around my feet to make a second mark. Thirdly, I stared intently at the precise place, fixing it in memory, so there would be no possibility of not finding it again.

When satisfied, I stood up and looked at this future.

vii

It was a holiday. The Park was crowded with people, all gay in summer clothes. The sun shone from a cloudless sky, a breeze rippled the ladies' dresses, and from a distant pagoda a band played stirring marches. It was all so familiar that my first instinct was that my parents and sisters must be somewhere about, and my illicit visit would be discovered. I ducked down against the bank of the Channel, but then I laughed at myself and relaxed; in my painstaking anticipation of this exploit I had

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considered the possibility of meeting people I knew, and had decided that the chance was too slender to be taken seriously. Anyway, when I looked again at the people passing — who were paying me no attention — I realized that there were subtle differences in their clothes and hair-styles, reminding me that for all the superficial similarities I had indeed travelled to the future.

I scrambled up to the tree-lined pathway and mingled with the throng, quickly catching the spirit of the day. I must have looked like any other schoolboy, but I felt very special indeed. After all, I had now leaped into the future twice.

This euphoria aside, I was there with a purpose, and I did not forget it. I looked across to the other bank, searching for a sight of Estyll. She was not by the bench, and I felt a crushing and illogical disappointment, as if she had deliberately betrayed me by not being there. All the frustration of the past months welled up in me, and I could have shouted with the agony of it. But then, miraculously it seemed, I saw her some distance away from the bench, wandering to and fro on the path on her side, glancing occasionally towards the Tomorrow Bridge.. I recognized her at once, although I am not sure how; during that other day in the future I had barely seen her, and since then my imagination had run with a free rein, yet the moment I saw her I knew it was she.

Gone was the shawl, and the arms that had been wrapped for warmth about her body were now folded casually across her chest. She was wearing a light summer frock, coloured in a number of pastel shades, and to my eager eyes it seemed that no lovelier clothes could have been worn by any woman in the world. Her short hair fell prettily about her face, and the way she held her head, and the way she stood, seemed delicate beyond words.

I watched her for several minutes, transfixed by the sight of her. People continued to mill past me, but for all I was aware of them they might not have been there.

At last I remembered my purpose, even though just seeing her was an experience whose joys I could not have anticipated. I walked back down the path, past the Tomorrow Bridge, and beyond the Today Bridge. I hastened across, and let myself through the exit-turnstile on the other side. Still in the same day, I went up the path towards where I had seen Estyll.

There were fewer people on this side of the Channel, of course, and the path was less crowded. I looked around as I walked, noticing that custom had not changed and that many people were sitting in the shade of the trees, with the re-

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mains of picnic meals spread out around them. I did not look closely at these groups; it was still at the back of my mind that I might see my own family here.

I passed the line of people waiting at the Tomorrow toll-booth, and saw the path continuing beyond. A short distance away, walking slowly to and fro, was Estyll.

At the sight of her, now so near to me, I paused.

I walked on, less confidently than before. She glanced in my direction once, but she looked at me in the same disinterested way as she looked at everybody. I was only a few yards from her, and my heart was pounding and I was trembling. I realized that the little speech I had prepared — the one in which I introduced myself, then revealed myself as witty and mature, then proposed that she take a walk with me — had gone from my mind. She looked so grown-up, so sure of herself.

Unaware of my concentrated attention on her, she turned away when I was within touching distance of her. I walked on a few more paces, desperately unsure of myself. I turned and faced her.

For the first time in my life I felt the pangs of uncontrollable love. Until then, the word had had no meaning for me, but as I stood before her I felt for her a love so shocking that I could only flinch away from it. How I must have appeared to her I cannot say: I must have been shaking, I must have been bright with embarrassment. She looked at me with calm grey eyes, and an enquiring expression, as if she detected that I had something of immense importance to say. She was so beautiful! I felt so clumsy!

Then she smiled, unexpectedly, and I had my cue to say something. Instead, I stared at her, not even thinking of what I could say, but simply immobilized by the unexpected struggle with my emotions: I had thought love was so simple.

Moments passed, and I could cope with the turbulence no more. I took a step back, and then another. Estyll had continued to smile at me during those long seconds of my wordless stare, and as I moved away her smile broadened and she parted her lips as if to say something. It was too much for me. I turned away, burning with embarrassment, and started to run. After a few steps, I halted and looked back at her. She was still looking at me, still smiling.

I shouted: *"I love you!"*

It seemed to me that everyone in the Park had heard me. I did not wait to see Estyll's reaction; I ran away. I hurried along the path, then ran up a grassy bank and into the shelter of some trees. I ran and

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ran, crossing the concourse of the open-air restaurant, crossing a broad lawn, diving into the cover of more trees beyond.

It was as if the physical effort of running would stop me thinking, because the moment I rested the enormity of what I had done flooded in on me. It seemed that I had done nothing right and everything wrong. I had had a chance to meet her, and I had let it slip through my fingers. Worst of all, I had shouted my love at her, revealing it to the world. To my adolescent mind, it seemed there could have been no grosser mistake.

I stood under the trees, leaning forward against the trunk of an old oak, banging my fist in frustration and fury.

I was terrified that Estyll would find me, and I never wanted to see her again. At the same time, I wanted her and loved her with a renewed passion ... and hoped, but hoped secretly, that she would be searching for me in the Park, and would come to me by my tree and put her arms around me.

A long time passed, and gradually my turbulent and contradictory emotions subsided.

I still did not want to see Estyll, so when I walked down to the path I looked carefully ahead to be sure I would not meet her. When I stepped down to the path itself — where people still walked in casual enjoyment, oblivious of the drama — I looked along it towards the bridges, but saw no sign of her. I could not be sure she had left so I hung around, torn between wincing shyness of her and profound devotion.

At last I decided to risk it, and hurried along the path to the toll-booths. I did not look for her, and I did not see her. I paid the toll at the Today Bridge, and returned to the other side. I located the marks I had made on the bank beside the Tomorrow Bridge, aimed myself at the scratch on the bridge floor, and leaped across towards it.

I emerged in the day I had left. Once again, my rough-and-ready way of travelling through time did not return me to a moment precisely true to elapsed time, but it was close enough. When I checked my watch against the clock in the toll-booth, I discovered I had been gone for less than a quarter of an hour. Meanwhile, I had been in the future for more than three hours.

I caught an earlier train home, and idled away the rest of the day on my bicycle in the countryside, reflecting on the passions of man, the glories of young womanhood, and the accursed weaknesses of the will.

ix

I should have learned from experience, and never tried to see Estyll

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again, but there was no quieting the love I felt for her. Thoughts of her dominated every waking moment. It was the memory of her smile that was central: she had been encouraging me, inviting me to say the very things I had wanted to say, and I missed the chance. So, with the obsession renewed and intensified, I returned to the Park, and did so many times.

Whenever I could safely absent myself from school, and could lay my hands on the necessary cash, I went to the Tomorrow Bridge and leapt across to the future. I was soon able to judge that dangerous leap with a marvellous instinctive skill. Naturally, there were mistakes; once, terrifyingly, I landed in the night, and after that experience I always took a small pocket flashlight with me. On two or three occasions my return jump was inaccurate, and I had to use the time-bridges to find the day I should have been in.

After a few more of my leaps into the future, I felt sufficiently at home to approach a stranger in the Park and ask him the date. By telling me the year he confirmed that I was exactly twenty-seven years ahead. The stranger I spoke to was apparently a local man, and by his appearance a man of some substance, and I took him sufficiently into my confidence to point out Estyll to him. I asked him if he knew her, which he said he did, but could only confirm her given name. It was enough for me, because by then it suited my purpose not to know too much about her.

I made no more attempts to speak to Estyll. Barred from approaching her by my painful shyness I fell back on fantasies, which were much more in keeping with my timid soul. As I grew older, and became more influenced by my favorite poets, it seemed not only more sad and splendid to glorify her from a distance, but appropriate that my role in her life should be passive.

To compensate for my nervousness about trying to meet her again, I constructed a fiction about her.

She was passionately in love with a disreputable young man, who had tempted her with elaborate promises and wicked lies. At the very moment she had declared her love for him, he had deserted her by crossing the Tomorrow Bridge into a future from which he had never returned. In spite of his shameful behavior her love held true, and every day she waited in vain by the Tomorrow Bridge, knowing that one day he would return. I would watch her covertly from the other side of the Channel, knowing that her patience was that of the lovelorn; too proud for tears, too faithful for doubt, she

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was at ease with the knowledge that her long wait would be its own reward.

In the present, in my real life, I sometimes dallied with another fiction: that *I* was her lover, that it was for me she was waiting. This thought excited me, arousing responses of a physical kind that I did not fully understand.

I went to the Park repeatedly, gladly suffering the punishments at school for my frequent, and badly excused, truancies. So often did I leap across to that future that I soon grew accustomed to seeing other versions of myself, and realized that I had sometimes seen other young men before, who looked suspiciously like me, and who skulked near the trees and bushes beside the Channel and gazed across as wistfully as I. There was one day in particular — a lovely, sunny day, at the height of the holiday season — that I often lighted on, and here there were more than a dozen versions of myself, dispersed among the crowd.

One day, not long before my sixteenth birthday, I took one of my now customary leaps into the future, and found a cold and windy day, almost deserted. As I walked along the path I saw a child, a small boy, plodding along with his head down against the wind and scuffing at the turf with the toes of his shoes. The sight of him, with his muddy legs and tear-streaked face, reminded me of that very first time I had jumped accidentally to the future, and I stared at him as we approached each other. He looked back at me, and for an instant a shock of recognition went through me like a bolt of electricity. He turned his eyes aside at once, and stumped on by, heading towards the bridges behind me. I stared at him, recalling in vivid detail how I had felt that day, and how I had been fomenting a desperate plan to return to the day I had left, and as I did so I realized — at long last — the identity of the friend I had made that day.

My head whirling with the recognition, I called after him, hardly believing what was happening.

"Mykle!" I said, the sound of my own name tasting strange in my mouth. The boy turned to look at me, and I said a little uncertainly: "It is Mykle, isn't it?"

"How do you know my name?" His stance was truculent and he seemed unwilling to be spoken to.

"I ... was looking for you," I said, inventing a reason for why I should have recognized him. "You've jumped forward in time, and don't know how to get back."

"Yes, but —"

"I'll show you how. It's easy."

As we were speaking, a distracting thought came to me: so far

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I had, quite accidentally, duplicated the conversation of that day. But what if I were to change it consciously? Suppose I said something that my 'friend' had not; suppose young Mykle were not to respond in the way I had? The consequences seemed enormous, and I could imagine this boy's life — my own life — going in a direction entirely different. I saw the dangers of that, and I knew I had to make an effort to repeat the dialogue, and my actions, precisely.

But just as it had when I tried to speak to Estyll, my mind went blank.

"...it's all right thank you, sir," the boy was saying. "I can find my own way."

"By running across the bridges?" I wasn't sure if that was what had been said to me before, but I knew that had been my intention.

"How did you know?"

I found I could not depend on that distant memory, and so, trusting to the inevitable sweep of destiny, I stopped trying to remember. I said whatever came to mind.

It was appalling to see myself through my own eyes. I had not imagined that I had been quite such a pathetic-looking child. I had every appearance of being a sullen and difficult boy; there was a stubbornness and a belligerence that I both recognized and disliked. And I knew there was a deeper weakness too: I could remember how I had seen myself, my *older* self, that is. I recalled my 'friend' from this day as callow and immature, and mannered with a loftiness that did not suit his years. That I (as a child) had seen myself (as young man) in this light was condemnation of my then lack of percipience. I had learned a lot about myself since going to school, and I was more adult in my outlook than the other boys at school; what is more, since falling in love with Estyll I had taken great care over my appearance and clothes, and whenever I made one of these trips to the future I looked my best.

However, in spite of the shortcomings I saw in myself-as-boy, I felt sorry for young Mykle, and there was certainly a feeling of great spirits between us. I showed him what I had noticed of the changes in the Park, and then we walked together towards the Tomorrow Bridge. Estyll was there on the other side of the Channel, and I told him what I knew of her. I could not convey what was in my heart, but knowing how important she was to become to him, I wanted him to see her and love her.

After she had left, I showed him the mark I had made in the surface of the bridge, and after I had persuaded him to make the

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leap — with several sympathetic thoughts about his imminent reception — I wandered alone in the blustery evening, wondering if Estyll would return. There was no sign of her.

I waited almost until nightfall, resolving that the years of admiring her from afar had been long enough. Something that young Mykle had said deeply affected me. Allowing him a glimpse of my fiction, I had told him: "She is waiting for her lover." My younger self had replied: "I think you are her lover, and won't admit it."

I had forgotten saying that. I would not admit it, for it was not strictly true, but I would admit to the *wish* that it were so.

Staring across the darkening Channel, I wondered if there were a way of making it come true. The Park was an eerie place in that light, and the temporal stresses of the flux-field seemed to take on a tangible presence. Who knew what tricks could be played by Time? I had already met myself — once, twice, and seen myself many times over — and who was to say that Estyll's lover could *not* be me?

In my younger self I had seen something about my older self that I could not see on my own. Mykle had said it, and I wanted it to be true. I would make myself Estyll's lover, and I would do it on my next visit to the Park.

X

There were larger forces at work than those of romantic destiny, because soon after I made this resolution my life was shaken out of its pleasant intrigues by the sudden death of my father.

I was shocked by this more profoundly than I could ever have imagined. In the last two or three years I had seen very little of him, and thought about him even less. And yet, from the moment the maid ran into the drawing-room, shrilling that my father had collapsed across the desk in his study, I was stricken with the most awful guilt. It was I who had caused the death! I had been obsessed with myself, with Estyll ... if only I had thought more of him, he would not be dead!

Of course, much of this was hysteria, but in the sad days before the funeral, it seemed less than wholly illogical. My father knew as much about the workings of the flux-field as any man alive, and after my childhood adventure he must have had some inkling of my frequent absences, and yet he had said nothing. It was almost as if he had been deliberately standing by, hoping something might come of it all.

In the days following his death, a period of emotional transition, it seemed to me that Estyll was inextricably bound up with the trag-

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edy. However much it flew in the face of reason, I could not help feeling that if I had spoken to Estyll, if I had acted rather than hidden, then my father would still be alive.

I did not have long to dwell on this. When the first shock and grief had barely passed, it became clear that nothing would ever be quite the same again for me. My father had made a will, in which he bequeathed me the responsibility for his family, his work and his fortune.

I was still legally a child, and one of my uncles took over the administration of the affairs until I reached my majority. This uncle, deeply resentful that none of the fortune had passed to him, made the most of his temporary control over our lives. I was removed from school, and started in my father's work. The family house was sold, the governor and the other servants were discharged, and my mother was moved to a smaller household in the country. Salleen was quickly married off, and Therese was sent to boarding-school. It was made plain that I should take a wife as soon as possible.

My love for Estyll — my deepest secret — was thrust away from me by forces I could not resist.

Until the day my father died, I did not have much conception of what his work involved, except to know that he was one of the most powerful and influential men in the Neuropean Union. This was because he controlled the power-stations which tapped energy from the temporal stresses of the flux-field. On the day I inherited his position I assumed this meant he was fabulously wealthy, but I was soon relieved of this misapprehension; the power-stations were state-controlled, and the so-called fortune comprised a large number of debentures in the enterprise. In real terms these could not be cashed, thus explaining many of the extreme decisions taken by my uncle. Death-duties were considerable, and in fact I was in debt because of them for many years afterwards.

The work was entirely foreign to me, and I was psychologically and academically unready for it, but because the family were now my responsibility, I applied myself as best I could. For a long time, shaken and confused by the abrupt change in our fortunes, I could do nothing but cope.

My adolescent adventures in Flux Channel Park became memories as elusive as dreams; it was as if I had become another person.

(But I had lived with the image of Estyll for so long that nothing could make me forget her. The flame of romanticism that had lighted my youth faded away, but

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it was never entirely extinguished. In time I lost my obsessive love for Estyll, but I could never forget her wan beauty, her tireless waiting.)

By the time I was twenty-two I was in command of myself. I had mastered my father's job; although the position was hereditary, as most employment was hereditary, I discharged my duties well and conscientiously. The electricity generated by the flux-field provided roughly nine-tenths of all the energy consumed in the Neuropean Union, and much of my time was spent in dealing with the multitude of political demands for energy. I travelled widely, to every state in Federal Neurop, and further abroad.

Of the family: my mother was settling into her long years of widowhood, and the social esteem that naturally followed; both my sisters were married. Of course I too married in the end, succumbing to the social pressures that every man of standing has to endure. When I was twenty-one I was introduced to Dorynne, a cousin of Salleen's husband, and within a few months we were wed. Dorynne, an intelligent and attractive young woman, proved to be a good wife, and I loved her. When I was twenty-five, she bore our first child: a girl. I needed an heir, for that was the custom of my country, but we rejoiced at her birth. We named her ... well, we named her Therese, after my sister, but Dorynne had wanted to call her Estyll, a girl's name then very popular, and I had had to argue against her. I never explained why.

Two years later my son Carl was born, and my position in society and industry was secure.

xi

The years passed, and the glow of adolescent longing for Estyll dimmed still further. Because I was happy with my growing family, and fulfilled by the demands of my work, those strange experiences in Flux Channel Park seemed to be a minor aberration from a life that was solid, conventional and unadventurous. I was no longer romantic in outlook; I saw those noble sentiments as the product of immaturity and inexperience, and such was the change in me that Dorynne sometimes complained I was unimaginative.

But if the romance of Estyll faded with time, a certain residual curiosity about her did not. I wanted to know: what had become of her? Who was she? Was she as beautiful as I remembered her?

Setting out these questions had lent them an urgency they did not possess. They were the questions of idle moments, or when something happened to remind me of her. Sometimes, for instance, my

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work took me along the Flux Channel, and then I would think briefly of her; for a short time a young woman in my office, and she had the same name. As I grew older, a year or more would sometimes pass without a thought of Estyll.

I should probably have gone for the rest of my life with these questions unanswered if it had not been for an event of major world importance. When the news of it came out, it seemed for a time to be the most exciting event of the century, as in some ways it was: the starship that had been launched a hundred years before was returning.

This news affected every aspect of my work, and at once I was involved in strategic and political planning at the highest level. What it meant was this: the starship could only return to Earth by the same means as it had left. The Flux Channel would have to be reconverted, if only temporarily, to its proper use. The houses in its vicinity would have to be evacuated, the power-tapping stations would have to be disconnected, and the Park and its time-bridges would have to be destroyed.

For me, the disconnection of the power-stations — with the inevitable result of depriving the Neuropean Union of most of its electricity — created immense problems. Permission had to be sought from other countries to generate electricity from fossil deposits for the months the flux-stations were inoperable, and permission of that sort could only be obtained after intricate political negotiation. We had less than a year in which to achieve this.

But the coming destruction of the Park struck a deeper note in me, as it did in many people. The Park was a much-loved playground, familiar to everyone, and, for many people, ineradicably linked with memories of childhood. For me, it was strongly associated with the idealism of my youth, and with a girl I had loved for a time. If the Park and its bridges were closed, I knew that my questions about Estyll would never be answered.

I had leapt into a future where the Park was still a playground, where the houses beyond the trees were still occupied. Through all my life I had thought of that future as an imaginary or ideal world, one unattainable except by a dangerous leap from a bridge. But that future was no longer imaginary. I was now forty-two years old. It was thirty-two years since I, as a ten-year old boy, had leapt thirty-two years into the future.

Today and Tomorrow coexisted once more in Flux Channel Park.

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If I did not act in the next few weeks, before the Park was closed, I should never see Estyll again. The memory of her flared into flame again, and I felt a deep sense of frustration. I was much too busy to go in search of a boyhood dream.

I delegated. I relieved two subordinates from work in which they would have been better employed, and told them what I wanted to discover. They were to locate a young woman or girl who lived, possibly alone, possibly not, in one of the houses that bordered the Park.

The estate consisted of some two hundred houses; in time, my subordinates gave me a list of over a hundred and fifty possible names, and I scanned it anxiously. There were twenty-seven women living on the estate who were called Estyll; it was a popular name.

I returned one employee to his proper work, but retained the other, a woman named Robyn. I took her partially into my confidence; I said that the girl was a distant relative and that I was anxious to locate her, but for family reasons I had to be discreet. I believed she was frequently to be found in the Park. Within a few days, Robyn confirmed that there was one such girl. She and her mother lived together in one of the houses. The mother was confined to the house by the conventions of mourning (her husband had died within the last two years), and the daughter, Estyll, spent almost every day alone in the Park. Robyn said she had been unable to discover why she went there.

The date had been fixed when Flux Channel Park would be closed to the public, and it was some eight and a half months ahead. I knew that I would soon be signing the order that would authorize the closure. One day between now and then, if for no other reason, Estyll's patient waiting would have to end.

I took Robyn further into my confidence. I instructed her to go to the Park, and, by repeated use of the Tomorrow Bridge, go into the future. All she was to report back to me was the date on which Estyll's vigil ended. Whether Robyn wondered at the glimpses of my obsession she was seeing, I cannot say, but she went without demur and did my work for me. When she returned, she had the date: it was just over six weeks away. That interview with Robyn was fraught with undertones that neither side understood. I did not want to know too much, because with the return of my interest in Estyll had come something of that sense of romantic mystery; Robyn, for her part, clearly had seen something that intrigued her. I found it

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all most unsettling.

I rewarded Robyn with a handsome cash bonus, and returned her to her duties. I marked the date in my private diary, then gave my full attention to the demands of my paper work.

xii

As the date approached I knew I could not be at the Park. On that day there was to be an energy conference in Geneva, and there was no possibility of my missing it. I made a futile attempt to change the date, but who was I against fifty heads of state? Once more I was tempted to let the great preoccupation of my youth stay forever unresolved, but again I succumbed to it. I could not miss this one last chance.

I made my travel-arrangements to Geneva with care, and instructed my secretarial staff to reserve me a compartment on the one overnight train which would get me there in time.

It meant that I should have to visit the Park on the day before the vigil was to end, but by using the Tomorrow Bridge I could still be there to see it.

At last the day came. I had no one to answer to but myself, and shortly after mid-day I left my office and had my driver take me to the Park. I left him and the carriage in the yard beyond the gate, and with one glance towards the estate of houses, where I knew Estyll and her mother lived, I went into the Park.

I had not been in the Park itself since my last visit just before my father died, and knowing that one's childhood haunts often seem greatly changed when revisited years later I had been expecting to find the place smaller, less grand than I remembered it. But as I walked slowly down the gently sloping sward towards the toll-booths, it seemed that the magnificent trees, and the herbaceous borders, the fountains, the pathways, and all the various kinds of landscaping in the Park gardens were just as I recalled them.

But the smells! In my adolescent longing I had not responded to those: the sweet bark, the sweeping leaves, the clustered flowers. A man with a mowing-machine clattered past, throwing up a moist green smell, and the shorn grass humped in the mower's hood like a sleeping furry animal. I watched the man as he reached the edge of the lawn he was cutting, turned the machine, then bent low over it to start it up the decline for his return. I had never pushed a mower, and as if this last day in the Park had restored my childhood, I felt an urge to dash across to him and ask him if I might try my hand.

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I smiled to myself as I walked on: I was a well known public figure, and in my drape suit and tall silk hat I should certainly have cut a comic sight.

Then there were the sounds. I heard, as if for the first time (and yet also with a faint and distracting nostalgia), the metallic click of the turnstile ratchets, the sound of the breeze in the pines that surrounded the Park, and the almost continuous soprano of children's voices. Somewhere, a band was playing marches.

I saw a family at picnic beneath one of the weeping willows: the servants stood to one side, and the paterfamilias was carving a huge joint of cold beef. I watched them surreptitiously for a moment. It might have been my own family, a generation before; people's delights did not change.

So taken was I by all this that I had nearly reached the toll-booths before I remembered Estyll. Another private smile: my younger self would not have been able to understand this lapse. I was feeling more relaxed, welcoming the tranquil surroundings of the Park and remembering the past, but I had grown out of the obsessive associations the place had once had for me.

I had come to the Park to see Estyll, though, so I went on past the toll-booths until I was on the path that ran beside the Channel. I walked a short way, looking ahead. Soon I saw her, and she was sitting on the bench, staring towards the Tormorrow Bridge.

It was as if a quarter of a century had been obliterated. All the calm and restful mood went from me as if it had never existed, to be replaced by a ferment of emotions that was the more shocking for being so unexpected.

I came to a halt, turned away, thinking that if I looked at her any more she would surely notice me.

The adolescent, the immature, the romantic child ... I was still all of these, and the sight of Estyll awakened them as if from a short nap. I felt large and clumsy and ridiculous in my over-formal clothes, as if I were a child wearing a grandparent's wedding-outfit. Her composure, her youthful beauty, the vital force of her vigil ... they were enough to renew all those inadequacies I had felt as a teenager.

But at the same time there was a second image of her, one which lay above the other like an elusive ghost. I was seeing her as an adult sees a child.

She was so much younger than I remembered her! She was smaller. She was pretty, yes ... but I had seen prettier women. She was dignified, but it was a precocious poise, as if she had been trained in

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it by a socially conscious parent. And she was young, so very young! My own daughter, Therese, would be the same age now, perhaps slightly older.

Thus torn, thus acutely conscious of my divided way of seeing her, I stood in confusion and distraction on the pathway, while the families and couples walked gaily past.

I backed away from her at last, unable to look at her any more. She was wearing clothes I remembered too well from the past: a narrow white skirt tight around her legs, a shiny black belt, and a dark-blue blouse embroidered with flowers across the bodice.

(I remembered — I remembered so much, too much. I wished she had not been there.)

She frightened me because of the power she had, the power to awaken and arouse my emotions. I did not know what it was. Everyone has adolescent passions, but how many people have the chance to revisit those passions in maturity?

It elated me, but also made me deeply melancholic; inside I was dancing with love and joy, but she terrified me; she was so innocently, glowingly young, and I was now so old.

xiii

I decided to leave the Park at once ... but changed my mind an instant later. I went towards her, then turned yet again and walked away.

I was thinking of Dorynne, but trying to put her out of my mind; I was thinking of Estyll, obsessed again.

I walked until I was out of sight of her, then took off my hat and wiped my brow. It was a warm day, but I knew that the sweat was not caused by the weather. I needed to calm myself, wanted somewhere to sit down and think about it ... but the Park was for pleasure, and when I went towards the open-air restaurant to buy a glass of beer, the sight of all the oblivious merriment was intrusive and unwelcome.

I stood on the uncut grass, watching the man with the mower, trying to control myself. I had come to the Park to satisfy an old curiosity, not to fall again into the traps of childhood infatuation. It was unthinkable that I should let a young girl of sixteen distract me from my stable life. It had been a mistake, a stupid mistake, to return to the Park.

But inevitably there was a deeper sense of destiny beneath my attempts to be sensible. I knew, without being able to say why, that Estyll was waiting there at her bench for *me,* and that we were destined at last to meet.

Her vigil was due to end tomor-

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row, and that was just a short distance away. It lay on the far side of the Tomorrow Bridge.

xiv

I tried to pay at the toll-booth, but the attendant recognized me at once. He released the ratchet of the turnstile with such a sharp jab of his foot that I thought he might break his ankle. I nodded to him, and passed through into the covered way.

I walked across briskly, trying to think no more about what I was doing or why. The flux-field prickled about my body.

I emerged into bright sunlight. The day I had left had been warm and sunny, but here in the next day it was several degrees hotter. I felt stiff and overdressed in my formal clothes, not at all in keeping with the reawakened, desperate hope that was in my breast. Still trying to deny that hope, I retreated into my daytime demeanour, opening the front of my coat and thrusting my thumbs into the slit-pockets of my waistcoat, as I sometimes did when addressing subordinates.

I walked along the path besides the Channel, looking across for a sight of Estyll on the other side.

Someone tugged at my arm from behind, and I turned in surprise. There was a young man standing there; he was nearly as tall as I, but his jacket was too tight across his shoulders, and his trousers were a fraction too short, revealing that he was still growing up. He had an obsessive look to him, but when he spoke it was obvious he was from a good family.

"Sir, may I trouble you with a question?" he said, and at once I realized who he was. The shock of recognition was profound, and had I not been so preoccupied with Estyll I am sure meeting him would have made me speechless. It was so many years since my time-jumping that I had forgotten the jolting sense of recognition and sympathy.

I controlled myself with great difficulty. Trying not to reveal my knowledge of him, I said: "What do you wish to know?"

"Would you tell me the date, sir?"

I started to smile, and glanced away from him for a moment, to straighten my face. His earnest eyes, his protuberant ears, his pallid face and quiffed-up hair!

"Do you mean today's date, or do you mean the year?"

"Well ... both actually, sir."

I gave him the answer at once, although as soon as I had spoken I realized I had given him *today's* date, whereas I had stepped forward one day beyond that. No matter, though: what he, I, was interested in was the year.

He thanked me politely, and

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made to step away. Then he paused, looked at me with a guileless stare (which I remembered had been an attempt to take the measure of this forbidding-looking stranger in a frock-coat), and said: "Sir, do you happen to live in these parts?"

"I do," I said, knowing what was coming. I had raised a hand to cover my mouth, and was stroking my upper lip.

"I wonder if you would happen to know the identity of a certain person, often to be seen in this Park?"

"Who —?" I could not finish the sentence; his eager, pinkening earnestness was extremely comical, and I spluttered an explosive laugh. At once I turned it into a simulated sneeze, and while I made a play with my handkerchief I muttered something about hay-fever. Forcing myself to be serious, I returned my handkerchief to my pocket and straightened my hat. "Who do you mean?"

"A young lady, of about my own age."

Unaware of my amusement he moved past me and went down the bank to where there was a thick cluster of rose-bushes. From behind their cover he looked across at the other side. He made sure I was looking too, then pointed.

I could not see Estyll at first, because of the crowds, but then saw that she was standing quite near to the queue for the Tomorrow bridge. She was wearing her dress of pastel colours: the clothes she had been wearing when I first loved her.

"Do you see her, sir?"

His question was like a discordant note in a piece of music. I had become perfectly serious again, and just seeing her made me want to fall into reflective silence. The way she held her head, the innocent composure.

He was waiting for a reply, so I said: "Yes ... yes, a local girl."

"Do you know her name, sir?"

"I believe she is called Estyll."

An expression of surprised pleasure came over his face, and his flush deepened. "Thank you, sir. Thank you."

He backed away from me, but I said: "Wait!" I had a sudden instinct to help him, to cut short those months of agony. "You must go and talk to her, you know. She wants to meet you. You mustn't be shy of her."

He stared at me in horror, then turned and ran into the crowd. Within a few seconds I could see him no more.

The enormity of what I had done struck me forcibly. Not only had I touched him on his most vulnerable place, forcing him to confront the one matter he had to work out for himself in his own

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time, but impetuously I had interfered with the smooth progression of events. In *my* memory of the meeting, the stranger in the silk hat had not given unsolicited advice!

A few minutes later, as I walked slowly along the path, pondering on this, I saw my younger self again. He saw me and I nodded to him, as an introduction, perhaps, to telling him to ignore what I had said, but he glanced away disinterestedly as if he had never seen me before.

There was something odd about him: he had changed his clothes, and the new ones fitted better.

I mused over this for a while, until I realized what must have happened. He was not the same Mykle I had spoken to: he was still myself, but here, on this day, from another day in the past!

A little later I saw myself again. This time I — he — was wearing the same clothes as before. Was it the youth I had spoken to? Or was it myself from yet another day?

I was quite distracted by all this, but never so much that I forgot the object of it all. Estyll was there on the other side of the Channel, and while I paced along the pathway I made certain she was never out of sight. She had waited beside the toll-booth queue for several minutes, but now she had walked back to the main path, and was standing on the grassy bank, staring, as I had seen her do so many times before, towards the Tomorrow Bridge. I could see her much better there: her slight figure, her young beauty.

I was feeling calmer at last; I no longer saw a double image of her. Meeting myself as a youth, and seeing other versions of myself, had reminded me that Estyll and I, apparently divided by the flux-field, were actually united by it. My presence here was inevitable.

Today was the last day of her vigil, although she might not know it, and I was here because I was *supposed* to be here.

She was waiting, and I was waiting. I could resolve it, I could resolve it now!

She was looking directly across the Channel, and seemed to be staring deliberately at me, as if the inspiration had struck her in the same instant. Without thinking, I waved my arm at her. Excitement ran through me. I turned quickly, and set off down the path towards the bridges. If I crossed the Today Bridge I should be with her in a matter of a few seconds! It was what I had to do!

When I reached the place where the Tomorrow Bridge opened on to this side, I looked back across the Channel to make sure of where she was standing.

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But she was no longer waiting! She too was hurrying across the grass, rushing towards the bridges. As she ran she was looking across the Channel, looking at me!

She reached the crowd of people waiting by the toll-booth, and I saw her pushing past them. I lost sight of her as she went into the booth.

I stood at my end of the bridge, looking down the ill-lit covered way. Daylight was a bright square two hundred feet away.

A small figure in a long dress hurried up the steps at the far end, and ran into the wooden tunnel. Estyll came towards me, raising the front of her skirt as she ran. I glimpsed trailing ribbons, white stockings.

With each step, Estyll moved further into the flux-field. With each frantic, eager step towards me, her figure became less substantial. She was less than a third of the way across before she had blurred and dissolved into nothing.

I saw her mistake! She was crossing the wrong bridge! When she reached this side — when she stood where I stood now — she would be twenty-four hours too late.

I stared helplessly down the gloomy covered way, watching as two children slowly materialized before me. They pushed and squabbled, each trying to be the first to emerge into the new day.

XV

I acted without further delay. I left the Tomorrow Bridge, and ran back up the slope to the path. The Today Bridge was about fifty yards away, and, clapping a hand on the top of my hat, I ran as fast as I could towards it. I thought only of the extreme urgency of catching Estyll before I lost her. If she realized her mistake and began to search for me, we might be forever crossing and recrossing the Channel on one bridge after another — forever in the same place, but forever separated in time.

I scrambled on to the end of the Today Bridge, and hurried across. I had to moderate my pace, as the bridge was narrow and several other people were crossing. This bridge, of the three, was the only one with windows to the outside, and as I passed each one I paused to look anxiously at each end of the Tomorrow Bridge, hoping for a glimpse of her.

At the end of the bridge, I pushed quickly through the exit-turnstile, leaving it rattling and clattering on its ratchet.

I set off at once towards the Tomorrow Bridge, reaching for the money to pay the toll. In my haste I bumped into someone: it was a woman, and I murmured an apology as I passed, affording her

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only a momentary glance. We recognized each other in the same instant: it was Robyn, the woman I had sent to the Park. But why was she here now?

As I reached the toll-booth I looked back at her again. She was staring at me with an expression of intense curiosity, but as soon as she saw me looking she turned away. Was *this* the conclusion of the vigil she had reported to me on? Is this what she had seen?

I could not delay. I pushed rudely past the people at the head of the queue, and threw some coins on to the worn brass plate where the tickets were ejected mechanically towards the buyer. The attendant looked up at me, recognized me as I recognized him.

"Compliments of the Park again, sir," he said, and slid the coins back to me.

I had seen him only a few minutes before; yesterday in his life. I scooped up the coins, and returned them to my pocket. The turnstile clicked as I pushed through; I went up the steps, and entered the covered way.

Far ahead: the glare of daylight of the day I was in. The bare interior of the covered way, with lights at intervals. No people.

I started to walk, and when I had gone a few paces across the flux-field, the daylight squared in the far end of the tunnel became night. It felt much colder.

And ahead of me: two small figures, solidifying, or so it seemed, out of the electrical haze of the field. They were standing together under one of the lights.

I went nearer, and saw that one of them was Estyll. The figure with her had his head turned away from me. I paused.

I had halted where no light fell on me, and although I was only a few feet away from them I would have seemed — as they seemed to me — a ghostly, half-visible apparition. But they were occupied with each other, and did not look towards me.

I heard him say: "Do you live around here?"

"In one of the houses by the Park. What about you?"

"No ... I have to come here by train." The hands held nervously by his side, the fingers curling and uncurling.

"I've often seen you here," she said. "You stare a lot."

"I wondered who you were."

There was a silence then, while the youth looked shyly at the floor, apparently thinking of more to say. Estyll glanced beyond him to where I was standing, and for a moment we looked directly into each other's eyes.

She said to the young man: "It's cold here. Shall we go back?"

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"We could go for a walk. Or I could buy you a glass of orange."

"I'd rather go for a walk."

They turned and walked towards me. She glanced at me again, with a frank stare of hostility; I had been listening in, and she well knew it. The young man was barely aware of my presence. As they passed me he was looking first at her, then nervously at his hands. I saw his too-tight clothes, his quiff of hair combed up, his pink ears and neck, his downy moustache; he walked clumsily, as if he were about to trip over his own feet, and he did not know where to put his hands.

I loved him, I had loved her.

I followed them a little way, until light shone in again at the toll-booth end. I saw him stand aside to let her through the turnstile first. Out in the sunshine she danced across the grass, letting the colours of her dress shine out, and then she reached over and took his hand. They walked away together, across the newly cut lawns towards the trees.

xvi

I waited until Estyll and I had gone, and then I too went out into the day. I crossed to the other side of the Channel on the Yesterday Bridge, and returned on the Today Bridge.

It was the day I had arrived in the Park; the day before I was due in Geneva, the day before Estyll and I were finally to meet. Outside in the yard, my driver would be waiting with the carriage.

Before I left I went for one more walk along the path on this side of the Channel, and headed for the bench where I knew Estyll would be waiting. I saw her through the crowd: she was sitting quietly and watching the people, dressed neatly in her white skirt and dark-blue blouse.

I looked across the Channel. The sunshine was bright and hazy, and there was a light breeze. I saw the promenading holidaymakers on the other side: the bright clothes, the festive hats, the balloons and the children. But not everyone blended with the crowd.

There was a rhododendron bush beside the Channel, and behind it I could just see the figure of a youth. He was staring across at Estyll. Behind him, walking along deep in thought, was another Mykle. Further along the bank, well away from the bridges, another Mykle sat in long grass overlooking the Channel. I waited, and before long another Mykle appeared. A few minutes later yet another Mykle appeared, and took up position behind one of the trees over there. I did not doubt that there were many more, each oblivious of all the others, each preoccupied

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with the girl who sat on the bench a few feet from me.

I wondered which one it was I had spoken to; none of them, perhaps, or all of them?

I turned towards Estyll at last, and approached her. I went to stand directly in front of her, and removed my hat.

"Good afternoon, miss," I said. "Pardon me for speaking to you like this."

She looked up at me in sharp surprise; I had interrupted her reverie. She shook her head, but turned on a polite smile for me.

"Do you happen to know who I am?" I said.

"Of course, sir. You're very famous." She bit her lower lip, as if wishing she had not answered so promptly. "What I meant was —"

"Yes," I said. "Do you trust my word?" She frowned then, and it was a consciously pretty gesture; a child borrowing a mannerism from an adult. "It will happen tomorrow," I said.

"Sir?"

"Tomorrow," I said again, trying to find some subtler way of putting it. "What you're waiting for .. it will happen then."

"How do you —?"

"Never mind that," I said. I stood erect, running my fingers across the brim of my hat. In spite of everything, she had the uncanny facility of making me nervous and awkward. "I'll be across there tomorrow," I said, pointing to the other side of the Channel. "Look out for me. I'll be wearing these clothes, this hat. You'll see me wave to you. That's when it will be."

She said nothing to this, but looked steadily at me. I was standing against the light, and she could not have been able to see me properly. But I could see her with the sun on her face, and with light dancing in her hair and her eyes.

She was so young, so pretty. It was like pain to be near her.

"Wear your prettiest dress," I said. "Do you understand?"

She still did not answer, but I saw her eyes flicker towards the far side of the Channel. There was a pinkness in her cheeks, and I knew I had said too much. I wished I had not spoken to her at all.

I made a courtly little bow, and replaced my hat.

"Good-day to you, miss," I said.

"Good-day, sir."

I nodded to her again, then walked past her and turned on to the lawn behind the bench. I went a short way up the slope, and moved over to the side until I was hidden from Estyll by the trunk of a huge tree.

I could see that on the far side of the Channel one of the Mykles I had spotted earlier had moved out

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from his hiding place. He stood on the bank in clear view; he had apparently been watching me as I spoke to Estyll, for now I could see him looking across at me, shading his eyes with his hand.

I was certain that it was him I had spoken to.

I could help him no more. If he now crossed the Channel twice, moving forward two days, he could be on the Tomorrow Bridge to meet Estyll as she answered my signal.

He stared across at me, and I stared back. Then I heard a whoop of joy. He started running.

He hurried along the bank, and went straight to the Today Bridge. I could almost hear the hollow clumping of his shoes as he ran through the narrow way, and moments later he emerged on this side. He walked, more sedately now, to the queue for the Tomorrow Bridge.

As he stood in line, he was looking at Estyll. She, staring thoughtfully at the ground, did not notice.

Mykle reached the toll-booth. As he went to the pay-desk, he looked back at me, and waved. I took off my hat, and waved it. He grinned happily.

In a few seconds he had disappeared into the covered way, and I knew I would not see him again. He had got it right; he would be there to meet her. I had seen it happen.

I replaced my hat, and walked away from the Channel, up through the stately trees of the Park, past where the gardener was still pushing his heavy mower against the grass, past where many families were sitting beneath the trees at their picnic luncheons.

I saw a place beneath a wide old cedar, where I and my parents and sisters had often eaten our meals. A cloth was spread out across the grass, with several dishes set in readiness for the meal. An elderly couple was sitting here, well under the shade of the branches. The lady was sitting stiffly in a folding canvas chair, watching patiently as her husband prepared the meat. He was carving a ham joint, taking slices from beneath the notch with meticulous strokes. Two servants stood in the background, with white linen cloths draped over their forearms.

Like me, the gentleman was in formal wear. His frock-coat was stiff and perfectly ironed, and his shoes shone as if they had been polished for weeks. On the ground beside him, his silken stove-pipe hat had been laid on a scarf.

He noticed my uninvited regard, and looked up at me. For a moment our gaze met, and we nodded to each other like the gentlemen we were. I touched the brim

(continued on page 52)

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JOHN CLUTE

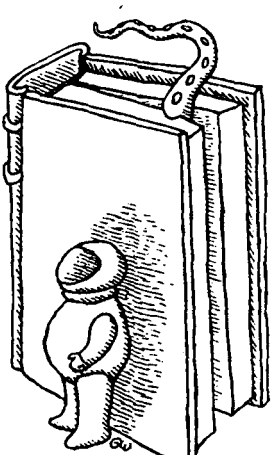
Books

The Jewel-Hinged Jaw; Notes of the Language of Science Fiction, Samuel R. Delany, Berkley, 1978, $4.95.

False Dawn, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, Doubleday, 1978, $7.95.

Dreamsnake, Vonda N. McIntyre, Houghton Mifflin, 1978, $8.95.

Strangers, Gardner Dozois, Berkley/Putnam, 1978, $7.95.



First a personal note. As a reviewer of sf, here and elsewhere, I've been accused of pedantry, bias, logorrhea, bile, sophomoric obscurity, and some other things. These accusations are accurate. They can be sustained by chapter and verse. They have the ring of truth. I mention the fact to register my knowledge that, when I take a few digs at Samuel R. Delany's criticism, as I'm certainly about to, I'm going to be accusing him of sins I've been guilty of myself, though never again of course.

The book in question is Delany's collection of critical essays and reviews called *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw; Notes of the Language of Science Fiction,* or so the subtitle reads in Berkley's revised and corrected version of the original 1977 Dragon Press production; presumably some of the corrections are more felicitous than changing *Notes on...* to *Notes of...*, though grammatical, stylistic and factual howlers do still abound, despite Delany's paying of thanks, "for myriad micro-improvements," to three colleagues, whose names I thought were oddly spelled. But when one actually experiences the clotted precocity of his prose, the phrase quoted above being entirely typical of its uneasy condescension and agglutinative gumminess, then the

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multitude of typos and other errors does seem more forgiveable, because translatorese is always hard to get a grip on; the Rube Goldberg *unworkableness* of much of the writing in this book, especially in the earlier and middle essays collected, does in fact make the task of winkling out paraphrasable content almost impossible. Trying to do so I got vertigo and eyestrain and began to drink heavily, over the three months. Ultimately I failed, as the three microimproving colleagues must have before me. I could not even patch together an adequate sense of what I had failed to understand; after all, as Delany does say in a clear moment, style and content are intersecting models of one another. I'm paraphrasing him. At the heart of this failure of mine — beyond the word-deaf gaucheries of the style, beyond the intrusive self-congratulatory garish foregrounding of the auctorial voice with all its morose cheeriness and duck-pond aggro — lay a sense that when I *did* think I understood the terms and assumptions shaping a paragraph, by the dint of a lot of deconstruction work, what I was left with was a kind of shambles strewn with disqualified data and beheaded arguments, a spastic *Guernica*. An example is overdue. The one I'm going to pick — because I'm not going to try anything really hard — is couched far more clearly and calmly than much of the book. It is from a 1968 essay on Thomas M. Disch and Roger Zelazny entitled "Faust and Archimedes," though the meaning of that title kept dodging out of sight down webs of semantic branching, and part of the argument of the piece is designed to show that although neither writer would do badly when compared to the "mainstream," the very idea of a mainstream of literature is of little use when the best innovative work of the likes of Disch and Zelazny makes nonsense of a distinction which is in any case invidious. Slightly earlier, though, Delany suggests, in the late 40s and 50s up to about 1957, the work of sf writers like Leiber, Merril, Pohl and Knight can unfortunately be described in terms of their relationship to a mainstream in the doldrums:

> ...For the most part the narrative techniques (of these writers) are naturalistic. What was being produced in the mainstream at the same time as these stories were being written? Early Capote, the first novels of Mailer and Bellow, the last books of Hemingway, the tales of J. D. Salinger, Faulkner's *Snopes* trilogy. All of these are remarkably staid works. The most experi-

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mental would be Kerouac's *On the Road* and even that looks downright classical compared to the literary experiments of the twenties, thirties, and early forties: *The Sound and the Fury, As I Lay Dying,* Dos Passo's *U.S.A.* ..., Borge's fables in South America (...), Genet's criminal peons in France (so many people forget that *Notre Dame des fleurs* was first published in 1942). It is actually a little depressing to realize just how closely the best s-f of that period does parallel the mainstream. But the parallel justifies the critical concern. All this writing was done before *Catch 22* or *V.* Though Durrell and Nabokov had been favorites of a small coterie of writers that, admittedly, included figures as diverse as T. S. Eliot, Edmund Wilson, and Henry Miller, their names were almost unknown to the intellectual public. Neither Barth nor Barthelme had published.

So. It's a pretty tendentious list of the "remarkably staid" that Delany presents us with, nor is it by any means clear what his criteria of inclusion were — some of the books and authors mentioned were popular at the time, some later; some are American, some are not; some mainstream, some not; and so forth. As a list, then, which had better be accurate as far as it goes, and as far as it goes pretty thorough, the signs are already ominous. But let's take a closer look. Norman Mailer's first novel, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), is certainly not experimental, nor is it really very staid, but his second, *Barbary Shore* (1951), is decidedly experimental (though kind of staid). The first volume of Faulkner's *Snopes* trilogy, *The Hamlet,* was published in 1940, and is neither experimental nor staid; the second and third volumes, published in 1957 and 1959, are not experimental but are extremely staid. Of Faulkner's publications that actually fit into the period the list is supposed to describe, *Requiem for a Nun* (1951) and *A Fable* (1954) are both highly experimental (and very staid). His early work, like *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), was initially appreciated by a rather smaller "coterie" than that which already knew of Vladimir Nabokov when he published *Bend Sinister* (1947), experimental (not staid) and *Nine Stories* (1947), some one thing some another (some staid some not), or *Lolita* (1955), not staid, or *Pnin* (1957), calm (but not staid). It is somewhat deflating to realize that "Genet's criminal peons" are most probably not law-breaking members of the laboring classes of

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South America on a European prison tour, but merely criminal paeans, and if we find that "so many people forget that *Notre Dame des fleurs* was first published in 1942," it is probably because most people who are aware of the date of its first publication know it was first published in 1944, and that in any case Genet's most intense creative period lies in the decade after this date, as does the beginning of his influence on the "mainstream." The same might be said of Samuel Beckett, whom Delany doesn't mention, but whose published works in this remarkably staid period include *Watt* (1944), *Molloy* (1951; trans. 1956), *Malone Dies* (1952; trans. 1956), *The Unnamable* (1953; trans. 1958), *Waiting for Godot* (1952; trans. 1954) and *Endgame* (1957). But one should be fair to at least one version of what the list is supposed to describe, and if one sticks closer to North America than Delany does, a list of authors relevant to any look at innovation in the novel at this time would include Malcolm Lowry with *Under the Volcano* (1947), John Hawkes with *The Cannibal* (1949) and others, Bernard Malamud with *The Natural* (1952), Wright Morris with *The Works of Love* (1952) and others before and after, William Gaddis with *The Recognitions* (1955) and James Purdy with *63: Dream Palace* (1956). All experimental. Some staid. Some not staid.

It is certainly the case that Kerouac's experiments in *On the Road* (1957) pale beside the accomplishments of the great Modernist writers who mourned the end of civilization in the 1920s, but lack of interest does not make a work "downright classical," unless by classical one means, ah, *staid.* Right. Got it. Classical means old-fashioned. *There's* an argument for ya. But enough (John Barth published *The Floating Opera* in 1956) is enough. It's enough to demonstrate that in this case (and others) the data upon which Delany bases what seems to be an argument are so amateurishly skewiff that after you wipe the gouache out of your eyes there's nothing left but unbalanced and indecipherable assertion, and what that assertion is designed to demonstrate *I do not know.* I will reiterate a confession. I have spent all this time in the bilgewater because I don't know how to describe the ship. All I can say is that some idiot savant has had this craft on the rocks somewhere, because the bilge is rising.

But that's not entirely fair. Bits of the arguments about the nature of sf as opposed to "mundane" literature, though tendentious and embarrassing in their attempts to

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restrict the imaginative scope theoretically realizable within a "mundane" text, are at least arousing. And the late long essay on Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) is a brilliant demolition job. Delany is at his best when he's forced to stick close to a given text, and his close reading of Le Guin interestingly foreshadows his most recent work, *The American Shore,* a book-length structural analysis of a short story from Disch's *334* (1972); I have only seen unbound galleys of this book, however, and will not presume to deal with a work of its formidable complexity on the basis of an uncorrected and unpublished text. The Jaw is open. May it close on meat.

Three book-length fictions here. Ah call them novels why not, even though only one of the authors involved, Gardner Dozois with *Strangers,* actually expands his original novella into a tale of sufficient complexity to warrant its new length, while Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, with *False Dawn,* and Vonda N. McIntyre, with *Dreamsnake,* merely extend their original (and both excellent) short stories (McIntyre's "Of Mist, and Grass, and Sand" deserved its Nebula) into shambling quest tales whose episodes append themselves to that original material like rows of dominoes, both writers only laying off their task when enough words have been written to make up the length (though not the substance) of a book. There's no need to go over the exigencies of a market that favors short stories and pays relatively little for the product it favors, while reserving its really substantial rewards of cash and fame for book publications, however arrived at. And Yarbro and McIntyre can hardly be *blamed* for responding with no more than strictly professional decorum to the challenges their own material presents, though at the same time neither of them can be much praised for skating, however decorously, into a sow's ear.

But still. But still. Both Yarbro and McIntyre have (perhaps unconsciously?) attempted to bluff their way through a very difficult course indeed. To use a short story as the first chapter of a novel means that the meaning of every word of that short story must be radically altered. The words that make up the narrative of a short story comprise a resonating insight whose closure (with the last phrase) completes a vision the mind's eye can hold entire; when that same narrative begins a novel, a transmutation should occur: Sentences moving to aesthetic closure must be transformed into a series of establishing shots leading us in-

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to the multifarious complexity of the novel form, into a vision the mind's eye tends to examine as an interwoven mosaic. Of course sf writers tend to optimism; they are used to creating worlds where magical transitions and manipulative reality shifts are very common indeed, and which represent, at the level of technique, the common sf sense that the given world is inherently subject to radical change. Perhaps that is one of the reasons so many sf novels are in fact assemblages of ill-matched shorter narratives whose interfaces constitute a cheap-change version of optimism about the world. But still.

Something has to happen. In "False Dawn," the short story that serves as the first chapter of *False Dawn,* a tough but nervous female protagonist is managing to survive a vastly complex ecological disaster that has engulfed and ruined the world; she treks through a grotesquely Boschian California, her survival facilitated by a mutated capacity to regenerate her own tissue, and teams up with a one-armed man who turns out to be the ex-leader of a vicious band of marauders who seem to be attempting to cleanse the land by killing off mutants, destroying farm communities, and raping a lot; indeed, Yarbro's protagonist is herself raped savagely, and finally escapes into the night with her companion to face a desolate future. Because it is a short story, the rape of the land and the rape of the lady model each other effectively, and her final escape is closure indeed, and a false dawn. In the novel form, she treks across California with her companion hither and yon, looking for a safe haven, and tortured by images of her personal rape. Within the texture of the extended tale, these images fail to resolve, despite an extraordinarily perfunctory sexual coupling she finally permits her friend. At the end of the novel — after the effective marriage of versions of rape has lost all its shaping power — the two of them once again escape the marauders, but just as hopelessly as before. The story has been demolished, and nothing has taken its place. We are where we began, after a lot of words. Nothing has happened. But the book reads easily, makes no challenges, has only one difficult word (agapate), can be slept through comfortably, and will be popular.

Vonda N. McIntyre's *Dreamsnake* turns out to be set in the same desolate future Earth as her first novel, *The Exile Waiting,* though to little effect. In the short story, the wandering healer Snake has lost her dreamsnake, an alien serpent whose bite soothes the dying into an easy demise; the tale of how this loss comes about is a

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moving vision of incomprehension and blindness, a vision whose strength lies in the sense that the loss it depicts is irreversible. In the novel it turns out not to be irreversible at all; Snake treks across her world, healing now and then, adopting a daughter, and questing for a new dreamsnake. Knowing that her society of healers has gotten its snakes from an underground city (that of *The Exile Waiting*) in the middle of the desert, she goes there, but is superstitiously rebuffed. But all is not lost. Discovering that a half-destroyed bubble dome harbors humans who own dreamsnakes, she goes there and after some travails acquires both a lot of snakes and the secret of how to breed them on Earth. Meeting Arevin whom she loves (from the original story) she begins the journey home. One snake is lost; a cornucopia of snakes is found. Things are sure looking up for Snake. Tragedy is transmuted into a picaresque ramble. A sequel is anticipated (by me). Staid.

Gardner Dozois' *Strangers* is something different, an organic expansion and elucidation of material rather than its mechanical extension through page after page of indefinitely prolongable quest routines. Several centuries hence, homo sapiens is permitted to travel to the stars in the ships of more advanced species, with devastating consequences to our mental health, as we find we're a Third World world. On the planet Weinunnach, where Dozois' beefy, stubborn, psychically blinkered young protagonist finds himself, Earth has constructed a sterile enclave from which it attempts to conduct trade with the native Cian, whose complexly ritualized and fail-safed culture we make no real attempt to understand. Except for Farber, the protagonist, and Ferri, an ethnologist: The latter professionally, Farber because he falls in love, after a fashion, with a native woman. Although they are strangers to one another at heart, Farber obsessively strives to bind her to him, as though to cure the fundamental accidie of his species by a transcendental act of communion, so as to understand another person, so as not to be Third World. But it doesn't work. After forcing a marriage with her, and having himself genetically altered by the Cian so they can interbreed, he tries to go native (in the enclave, Cian are self-defensively called Niggers) with her, but disastrously misunderstands her nature, and the shape of Cian culture, when he decides to have a child with her as soon as possible: Cian women die in childbirth. Cian secrecy has prevented knowledge of this basic fact from spreading, and Farber and Ferri only slowly come to un-

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derstand the nightmare they have entered, the depths of nescience in which they swim. Before coming to a final knowledge of his ignorance, Farber in a tantrum of panic and denial keeps his wife from the ultimate rituals designed to soothe her dying, so that she dies in the greatest of agony; his coming to awareness — however partial — is too late. She is dead. He has a litter of six Cian children. As the novel closes, he is looking for a male Cian to wetnurse them.

The novel form of *Strangers* tells the same story as the short-version; what is new or augmented is a dense, detailed, almost sociological accumulation of data, both cognitive and sensory, to the end that the reader lives in the humid, hallucinatory presence of the ultimately alien and strange. This complex impaction of information is what a novel can do, if a novel is being written and not a game of dominoes. Dozois has written a novel.

THE NEW CHALLENGE OF THE STARS, by Patrick Moore and David Hardy, Rand McNally, $9.95.

The first half of this book is a beautifully illustrated guide through the solar system. In the second section the author and artist turn to several classic sf themes (intergalactic travel, the asteroid ark, interstellar warfare), and the results will certainly delight sf readers. Text is by British astronomer Patrick Moore, introduction by Arthur C. Clarke, but you will want this book chiefly for the many full color paintings by David Hardy, the best astronomical artist in the field. — E.L.F.

(from p. 44)

of my hat, wished him and the lady good-afternoon. Then I hurried towards the yard outside; I wanted to see Dorynne before I caught the train to Geneva.

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"Sometimes I wish he'd go back to Hari Krishna!"

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Here is a first-rate Hollywood fantasy about a long-dead movie star of the thirties and his son, who watches his father's old films on TV and gradually detects something very strange and wrong in the performances.

Parental Guidance Suggested

by WILLIAM ROTSLER

Norman watched his dead father, on the television screen, slouched in the battered sofa, gripping a can of beer. The film was an old Warner Brothers black-and-white potboiler from the mid-Thirties, and his father, Norman Manford, Senior, was playing one of Edward G. Robinson's henchmen. It was Senior's third film, his second as a gangster, a role he was often to play. He held the good guy, helped beat him up, and had lines like "Yeah, boss," and "The coppers!"

It was 2:30 in the morning and the only light was from the bluish screen. He'd been waiting six days for this one, ever since his ritual search through *TV Guide.* He'd seen *The Last Gangster* before, but not for a long time. It was the one where the director allowed him the privilege — rare for bit players — of devising something a little special when he was killed, something more than the usual sprawl. He watched his father closely, critically, as if seeking something, some clue. His father was young then, younger than Junior was now, but even then he had that indescribable something called "star quality." People responded to it; they still did.

Junior suddenly frowned. There was something about the scene — between Allen Jenkins and his father — that was somehow different, or new. He didn't remember it quite like that. He chewed at his lip. He couldn't exactly pinpoint what the matter was; a line he didn't remember being there, some reference he didn't catch. He shook his head and gulped a swallow of warming beer, still frowning.

Norman Manford, Senior, had died of what was delicately called "complications," on September 19, 1948, just nine days before the

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birth of his first and only child. Like Clark Gable, some years later, he was never to see his eagerly awaited infant son. Nor had the son seen his father, except as a flickering two-dimensional image on a motion picture screen or television's phosphor stage. Unlike other small boys, who grew up knowing their fathers or some strong father-figure, Junior had grown up with a weak uncle, a strong aunt, a ghostly father-image and what knowledge he could glean from films and books. It was a paltry vein, shifting and uncertain; his father seemed so many different men. And all his father's friends said he had great plans for his son — but Junior didn't know what they had been.

He blinked. Senior had just said to Edward Brophy, "As the man says, what a father says to his children is not heard by the world ...but it will be heard by posterity."

The derby-hatted character actor took the cigar out of his mouth to give him a sneering reply. "Oh, yeah? I suppose you got sumpin' better for kids than parents?"

"No," Junior said aloud. That wasn't in the picture. Nothing close to it even. He was certain his mind wasn't playing tricks. His father played Blackie Marston, who was just not supposed to be that articulate. He watched the screen intently, but Joseph Calleia entered, dark and suavely sinister, Eddie G.'s archenemy, and the story went on, leaving Junior puzzled and uneasy. The young feminine leading woman reminded him of his mother, but, then, so many actresses of that period did.

Junior barely remembered his mother, dead when he was five, a failed starlet who didn't make it, even on Senior's coattails. Her career had collapsed at his death, she took up drinking as a serious hobby, and sent her son to live with her sister. Junior had a difficult time getting a fix on her. She looked so much like all the other young actresses of the late Thirties and early Forties, all even-featured into easily forgettable blandness, with their hair all in the same style, and broad Joan Crawford shoulders built into their dresses. They all had good cheekbones and perfect teeth; even their voices were alike. His mother showed up in some of his father's later pictures, those made at the peak of his earning power, and some after, as drink was helping the fall. But she had never played higher than second lead, "the other woman" parts, or parts with a touch of whore in them. She had died, he found out as an adult, of pills and booze. Her memory was in eight-by-ten-inch rectangles, glossy black-and-white, with her name and an agent's name

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in opposite corners.

Only his father had any reality, and not much of that. He hungered for something solid and personal. He couldn't get enough of the old movies; he combed the biographies of stars and directors for references; he collected memorabilia.

"You look just like him," people always said. Always. And always with just that touch of condescension tinged with pity and curiosity that replicas and counterfeits always receive. Junior was also an actor, or thought he was, but the Manford style of looks had passed out of vogue.

Robinson was into a scene with Jimmy Gleason, Roman Bohnen as the priest, and Priscilla Lane as the ingenue. He just waited. The double-cross was coming up soon. Eddie G. mentioned something about what his name — his character's name — meant. It started Junior thinking again about changing his. Being a Junior opened doors to some of the old-timers, and to some of the curious newcomers. But the old-timers were dying off or leaving the business, to be replaced by accountants from Gulf and Western, or hotshots from some other conglomerate. They had little or no feeling about *movies,* about the fun and — yes — mystique of films. It was just a business to them, or perhaps a source of attractive women. Their idea of beauty was a good-looking profit and loss sheet; they thought art was coming in under budget. They didn't know an out-take or a snoot from an Arriflex 35BL or a flat bed editor.

"Ah, the spittin' image of himself," the old guard at MGM always said, grinning. "Knew your old man, Junior — he had class. Not like some that come through here, now or then. Never failed to say hello. Even shot the breeze here, many's the time, waitin' for the rain to stop." The sigh and the wan smile. "Not all his shenanigans were out in front of the cameras, boy, nossir." The wink. "Central America, y'know, 'n' Shanghai before the war, the whole Orient. Wouldn't surprise me none if he'd done a touch of smugglin' or gun-runnin', y'know." Another broad wink. Another sigh. "Don't make 'em like that now. Well, son, who are ya wantin' t'see today?"

On the screen the G-men were closing in, and a burst of gunfire wounded Eddie G. in the upper arm. George Tobias was dead on the floor. Senior wanted to give up, to toss the guns out to Warren Douglas and Dick Lane, out beyond the big black cars. But Eddie G. wasn't having any of it and ended Senior's role with a slug from a snub-nosed .38. His father crashed

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back into the wall, took a long time dying, then went down, spilling the suitcase full of money. Norman got up and turned off the set right in the middle of Robinson's snarling speech to the coppers outside.

Dead, but not dead. Live, but not living.

Junior aimed the beer can at the waste basket, missed, then went on through the darkened room into the small bedroom. Somewhere there was a siren, rising and falling. He could hear the traffic noises from Sunset Boulevard, and the distant faint rumble from the freeway. He turned on the light and pulled down the Murphy bed. The light revealed the movie posters all over the walls. Some had been found in storage, but most had been bought at stiff prices at Collector's Books, a couple of blocks east of the Chinese Theater, on Hollywood Boulevard.

Some of the posters said "Costaring Norman Manford." Others proclaimed "Starring Norman Manford," sometimes with a name before his. A precious few had the name above the title: "Norman Manford in." Those were the important ones, the ones that were remembered, the swashbucklers and the bullet-riddled gangster epics. There were none that said "with Norman Manford," because Junior hated those. His father looked puffy from drinking and walked through the parts with contempt, or worse — utter indifference. Those were the films of his declining years and not the way Junior wanted to remember his father.

He undressed and stretched out on the bed. Those extra lines in *The Last Gangster* bothered him, but a life-long problem was more on his mind. Living with another man's name and face — even if it was his father's. He was always being compared, measured, being "better than" or, more often, "not as good as." People compared him only to the Image of his father, to the Legend, not the reality. He thought he was just as good an actor as his parent, perhaps even better; but he just didn't seem to have that charisma. Or if he did, they thought it imitation.

Junior envied his friend Tony Haze, not only because his father was living and often helped him, but because he had another name. He also was not the son of a star, but of a character actor, one of those familiar faces that had no name to anyone outside the industry, but one of those actors who was always working. Not because he was so good, but simply because he was dependable, always showing up on time knowing his lines, seldom "blew" and was never really *bad*. He had worked with Senior

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and had tales of dressing room trysts with beautiful actresses, sound stage pranks and location antics. He'd also been the one that put the film society in touch with Junior.

The Norman Manford Film Festival was one of a series of tributes by a group of film buffs to the stars and directors of yesteryear. Junior had hated going, hated the questions, the curious stares of comparison. But he had needed the money they offered him. It had been nice to see good prints of *Captain Danger* and *The Pirates of Tortuga,* but the questions had bothered him more than he cared to admit.

"Is it true your father died of drink?"

"Yes," Junior had replied with a practiced smile. "He slipped and fell into a martini and there was no olive to cling to. Next question?"

The expected, dreaded question and the prepared ad-lib. The usual ones about the three wives, the Forrest Tucker incident, the motivation for the gimmick in *Ganglord,* the Freudian questions about guns — all expected. The answers were glib, easy, pat. But all the people who came up for autographs were not the film buffs, but the *fans,* all after some kind of mark on a piece of paper to give them some tenuous connection to a star. Any star.

He'd asked his Uncle Ted, who had raised him, "What was my father like?" He'd asked first at fifteen, then many times afterwards, hoping for some clue, some different response.

But he always got some variation on "Just like you see him on television, Norman, always charming and very, very brave." But Aunt Connie had a few other comments. She'd been his mother's sister and thought Senior could have done more for his wife. "He was a sonofabitch, Norm, but a charmer, I got to say that. He was really looking forward to having a son, you know. Always wanted a boy. Had plans, he did, all kinds of plans for you. Was going to change his life, but...well, it was too late, that's all. Got your mother drinking, too. Well, that's all chaser under the bridge now, huh?"

He had asked the old-timers at the studios, too, the directors and grips, the property men and gaffers, the enduring technicians. And even some of the actresses, mostly now doing character work, but who had once been leading ladies and ingenues. "Oh, your old man was something," one said. She smiled with fond remembrance and shook her head. "Oh, the tales I could tell you, boy." But she never did and left Junior with the feeling that Senior had been her lover.

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Among others.

He had even searched the microfilms of the *Los Angeles Times,* looking at old Hedda Hopper columns for mentions. He meant to go through the *Examiner,* too, and dig into what Louella Parsons had said, but he never seemed to get time for that. It had been the time of the Hays and Breen offices, the Morals Clauses, virgin actresses, spotless reputations, and little cleavage. Barrymore, Flynn and Mitchum had survived scandals, but Norman Manford didn't quite make that very privileged class. He had to toe the line for the Front Office, for those old bitches Hedda and Louella, for the Eastern Banks and America's Heartland. Junior smiled into the dark. He would have loved today's code, Junior thought, and fell asleep.

He woke up to a phone call from Amanda. She was giving him trouble, perhaps more than she was worth. He had broken up with her several times, but it didn't seem to take. She loved him, she said, but she couldn't marry a man who couldn't support her in the manner to which she wanted to become accustomed. Junior didn't remember even asking her, but he knew women could read between the lines of verbal contracts. It was true he couldn't support her, not now, maybe not ever. He just didn't have the *drive* to get rich, or to get famous and thereby rich. It just wasn't very important to him.

But it was to Amanda. She wasn't a "Hollywood brat" like him; she'd grown up in South Gate, an L.A. suburb, and trying to be an actress was just something for a pretty girl to do until she got herself "settled." Being an actress gave her a certain amount of advertising, of cachet. Women's Liberation didn't interest her; there was too much work and responsibility involved. Secretly, she was waiting for some producer or big star to find her, give her the big house, the big car, the credit cards and fame. Without work, without talent, without trying, without anything. It happened, she said. Often. She was beautiful, wasn't she? Wasn't that enough? "All you have to be is at the right place at the right time," she often said, smugly. She spent her time in whatever was the latest chic place to be, drew money from daddy, and used Norman much as he used her — a convenience.

But she just couldn't quite believe that the big Mulholland Drive house, the custom Rolls, the yacht, the jewels were all gone in taxes, bad investments, alimony, high living and hospital bills. She kept citing Mary Pickford, Corinne Griffith, Harold Lloyd, Chaplin and Swanson and other old-time stars who were very well off. She just

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didn't hear Junior's comments on That Was Before Taxes and He Didn't Have An Honest Business Manager. All that was left was a tiny trust, a few scrapbooks with the Scotch tape turned dark and brittle, some minor awards, a proper sword, and a lot of curling photographs.

But somewhere Amanda Starling, *née* Doreen June Dahlke, had gotten the idea that Junior should star in a film about his father's life — with her as co-star, of course — and she just wouldn't let go of the idea. She tried again and again, and this morning was no exception.

"Met this writer at Pip's, Normie. Really interesting man, y'know? Credits as long as your leg. Wants to get together to talk about a bio. I'm setting it up for —"

"No, Amanda. He's just bullshitting you to ball you. Can't you tell by now?"

"Darling, *everyone* wants to ball me! I can't go on that alone. Now, listen... ."

Junior held the receiver away from his ear and looked at it. Then he cradled it against his shoulder and picked up *TV Guide,* looking at the clock. Just about right.

"No, Amanda."

"Forget it, Amanda."

"Good-by, Amanda."

He got up, put three eggs on to boil and went into the tiny bathroom. He came out brushing his teeth and turned on the television set. It was Norman Manford in *The Sea Warriors.* A rare week. During the commercial, he rinsed his mouth, cooled and peeled the eggs and poured the hot water into a cup of instant coffee. He got back just in time. He'd seen *The Sea Warriors* at least five times, but frequency never stopped him before and didn't this morning.

It was one of the biggies, a swashbuckler of the Errol Flynn genre, swords and ships and swinging from ropes. Marvelous stuff. Totally non-cerebral, the kind of film that gave movie critics hives. It was the one that Maureen O'Hara couldn't be in, which always saddened Norman. She would have been so much better than the simple-faced dolly who replaced her, thanks to the eternal lust of the studio head. During the scene between an elegant Joseph Schildkraut and a dirty Akim Tamiroff, he took the dishes in and came out with a glass of orange juice. He dropped into the couch, noticing it was getting a definite dent where he usually sat.

There was Senior, in a white dueling shirt, smiling. He took the young cabin boy over by the rail and was explaining about women. "Women are creatures wiser than men, Jamie, because they know

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less and understand more." Jamie listened worshipfully, as Senior treated him like an equal.

"No, sir," Jamie blurted, "she wants me to be rich! I just want to sail the seas, with you, sir, looking for adventure... ."

Senior nodded, his usual suave, man-of-the-world expression saying that he was leveling with a friend. "Aye, son, and that's a man's way, though most of what men call adventure is really just trouble and only later do ye call it adventure. If you live through it. But remember, lad, by the time a man meets a really fascinating woman, so much has happened to her that most men are afraid to take a chance. Don't you be like that, son — wait for the right one, be sure of your feelings, then *move!"* He shook his head warningly. "But don't be a woman's slave, either, boy. Few of them ever like that."

There was a broadside from Schildkraut's vessel and the battle was under way. Junior scratched his unshaven cheek and sipped at his juice. They must have cut that scene out of all the other showings, cutting it for time, probably. He hadn't seen it before and thought it interesting, but he became involved in the intricate editing of the battle scene. They were using footage from some other picture — probably *Black Swan,* as it was a Twentieth picture — and the thoughts about the new scene faded. By the time the film was over he didn't really care about Amanda's ideas about anything.

He found her waiting for him when he got back from his walk down to Schwab's to get *The Hollywood Reporter.* She started her campaign while he was still coming up the apartment house walk. He just kept shaking his head. "No, Amanda, it's a dumb, dumb, dumb idea. I am *not* going to say I'm behind it. They'd laugh me out of the office. Better you should make a bio on Sonny Tufts or Donald Meek."

"Norman... ."

"No."

The fight started in earnest, went into its second skirmish as they were undressing for a quick matinee. He had to smile at her "before sex" method of pressure. She relented, they balled, achieved their standard quota of orgasms, and the next battle began.

"You adore your father, Norman; how can you stand in the way of a project to glorify him like this?"

"Male bovine waste matter, Amanda."

The fighting escalated into war, ending in a Type II Pout and a Class I Stiff-Backed Walkout, but happily without Crying. Junior sighed and turned on Channel 13.

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Ganglord was on the early movie and he hadn't seen it in a couple of years.

Senior was soon shooting it out with the Eduardo Cianelli gang and stopped to reload his chopper. Claire Trevor cowered in a corner. "The trouble with you, sweetheart," Senior said with tight lips, "is that you are always pushing a guy. Get married, get ambitious, get this, get that. There are some guys who just ain't ready for that." Close-up of his eyes, hard and dark, with a cigarette dangling from his mouth. "No vine-covered cottage for Nick, see? I got other things to do, see?"

There was a burst of gunfire off camera and Nat Pendleton spun against the wall, uttered a catch phrase from earlier that now was drenched in pathos, and died. Claire screamed at another rattle of tommy-gun fire and covered her ears. Norman laughed nastily, smashed out some window panes with the barrel of his Thompson, loosened a burst and jumped aside as they answered his fire. Sweaty, hair artfully dishelved, he leaned against the wall and spoke to Claire. "No dame is stone-deaf, sweetheart. They'll hear diamonds every time." He sent a shattering trail of shots across at the rival gang, wounding Eddie Norris and putting a bit player out of the film. There was a quick close-up of Cianelli firing, then back to see Senior hit. He crashed back and fell to the floor. There was practically no blood. Claire crawled to him, clasping him to her bosom.

"Nick! Nick, darling!"

"No use, sweetheart, this is it. Just remember... ." He coughed. "Find another guy, one that likes to trim roses." He coughed again and a trickle of blood appeared at the corner of his mouth. "It would have been great to have those kids ya talked about, babe. I'd have gotten a tommy gun made to size for them." Another cough. He smiled wanly and knuckled her chin. "See ya, sweetheart. Don't take any wooden ... ." His head dropped and he died.

Junior stared in utter fascination. This was a whole new ending, he was certain of it. He was positive the film originally ended with Elisha Cook — another Junior — shooting it out with his father, Cook with big Colt .45s, but losing. *Then* Senior shoots Cianelli, and the cops come in and get him. In those days bad guys, even "good" bad guys had to pay for their transgressions. The easy, quick, dramatic way was with a bullet not jail.

It disturbed him, this new ending, and he tried to think of reasons for it. He would have liked to think it was his confused memory. He dug his address book out from

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under a pile of magazines and called Warren at the film society. He was a film buff who would know. But there was no answer. Junior scratched his face and dialed his agent, Stanley.

"Sorry, kid, you lost it to that new stud in Morrie's stable. Hell, Norm, it was just a made-for-TV film. I'm saving you for something big, the big screen, man, the big time. Got something working on that; can't tell you about it now, but... ."

Yatata, yatata. Junior hung up in bad spirits and took a Tum for his sour stomach, then a beer to wash it down. He slumped into the couch again and read the beer label, beer bought with an unemployment check. He thought of trotting down to Schwab's and trading lies and hopes with other out-of-work actors, but it seemed too much trouble. He watched the last of a daytime soap, thinking in first gear about what he was going to do next — or *could* do next — when the promo for the evening movie on Channel 5 came on. Instead of the Dennis O'Keefe comedy announced in *TV Guide,* it was a Norman Manford western, *Gunfighters , West,* a better-than-average oater from the middle Forties.

Almost at once he detected a scene cut from the previous time he had seen it and restored in this showing. At least, that was what he thought. Maybe he was overdosing on his father's films, but it was like an addiction. He sat forward and put his elbows on his knees, massaging the beer can between his palms.

His father was telling the young son of a rancher he had befriended that being a gunfighter was not all glamour and high adventure.

"Most men work at what they happen to learn how to do," Senior said, "not at what they wish they had learned how to do. It's greener pastures, boy, that makes what another man does look invitin'. It takes more courage for your paw to sit on this here farm, grubbin' out a life for you and your maw, than it does for me to go traipsin' off, followin' my gun."

The boy protested, but Senior went right on. "You gotta do what you gotta do, son, but don't let no one pick out your trial for you." The boy nodded reluctantly, and so did Junior, sitting entranced with a beer grown warm.

Although he watched the rest of the film with unusual care, there was nothing else that seemed out of place. He turned off the set and sat thinking for a long time.

He had become an actor because he wanted to be like his father, to imitate him, to share the kind of real-life and fictional adventures he was always having,

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and because it was the easiest course of several open to him. He had worked a little as a child, mostly in live TV; in his teens, he was often the member of a gang, or an aristocratic youth at some eastern school. The work was easy and interesting enough. The pay was good, but infrequent, and up until adulthood there were still a lot of doors open to the Manford name. Some jobs were payoffs on old favors, some were cynical bids for a little extra publicity on films that could use it, some — a few — were genuine uses of his talents.

But was acting what he really wanted to do? There were lots of pretty girls in and around the movies, and although actors had plenty of prejudice against them in some circles, they still had attractions in other areas. Being an actor was a fine excuse to sleep late, lots of people said. But even after all these years he still didn't know the answer to that question he kept asking himself: *Is this what I want to do?* He knew what he *really* wanted to do — have real-life adventures like his father, or even cinematic adventures, stuff like *A Prince of Arabia* or any of the pirate flicks. Maybe acting just wasn't his thing, he thought sleepily. Maybe if I...maybe I should... .

He woke up suddenly, after midnight, with a mouth some sadist had been using to clean birdcages with. He staggered to his feet, upsetting the pile of beer cans near the couch. He took some aspirin and found there was no more beer in the refrigerator. With a kind of reflex action he turned on the television set.

"Son of a bitch," he said aloud. *Footlight Frolics* was on the Late, Late Show. He had thought that was still in the package of unsold Goldwyn pictures. He sat back to enjoy it, only slightly disturbed that this sudden mass of Manford films wouldn't sour the market for a while. He'd seen it only once before, at Virginia Mayo's house when he was a teenager.

It was the usual backstage confusion, wisecracks, musical numbers, misunderstandings and frantic attempts to set things straight. Iris Adrian and Phil Silvers, Barbara Nichols and Jerome Cowan. His father starred as a fast-talking song-and-dance man who was always in trouble with bookies and women. There was a serious moment early in the film, between Senior and a young actor Junior couldn't identify, while Virginia Mayo was on-stage, going through a number with a lot of feathers and sequins.

"An actor," Senior said, "seems to need something in his life to stabilize his personality, something to pin down what he

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really is, not what he is currently pretending to be."

The handsome young actor nodded, but protested that maybe he'd be better off as an architect like his father, with something solid and reliable. Senior smiled. "Son, you may think acting is sublimination for lying. Lots of people do. But it's serious work, not for amateurs. Be a pro or get out." He applauded as Virginia came off stage, giving the youth an aside. "Some have a talent for it and some don't."

During the commercial Junior sat unblinking, staring, waiting. Something very strange was going on. It was wrong, what was happening, something he wasn't certain he wanted to happen. It was exciting, but disturbing, like a new sound in the night. With the commercial over, Miss Mayo went back for another bow and was applauded into an encore. Senior turned to the boy. "Just don't confuse reality with real life, son." Virginia finished her song and waved for Senior to come on. He broke into a wide smile and went into a number with her.

Junior sat through the rest of the picture in a daze. Something was *definitely* wrong. He was certain those scenes didn't exist. He had his father's bound copy of that script. It couldn't have been something that had been shot, then taken out of the original release, then put back in for television. They never did that, not on television, because the costs of completely re-editing and re-dubbing were too high. Only Coppola and the *Godfather* had done that. But there *had* to be some explanation: faulty memory, different TV versions, some kind of original preview print, or —? None of the answers came close to satisfying him.

Long after the film had ended, after a flea collar commercial and one for an intimate-flavored douche, Junior sat watching blankly, staring, just thinking. No answers came. Sleep, when it did come, came hard.

The phone woke him. It was Stan, fresh out of a meeting at Universal and bubbling over. "We did it, we did it! It's fantastic, Norm — fan-frigging-*tastic!* I got you the hottest role in town, baby the long shot paid off —! Sweated blood on this one, man, I tell *you!*

"Stan...what *is* it?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah...it's the lead, hear that, the *lead* in *Chicago Hard Guy,* only they're going to call it *Bullets and Ballerinas* now."

"My father did that."

"Yeah, right, isn't it great, huh? Like father, like son. Universal's going to produce and distribute, natch; Glen Larson's the

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producer; the director will be either John Frankenheimer or Peter Yates! How about *that,* huh? Is nostalgia in or not, huh? They've already set Jacqueline Bisset for the femme lead and —"

"Forget it, Stan,"

"What? Norm, boy, what have you been shooting? This is the Cinderella story of the year, poochie. Okay, so it's remake time, but look at *King Kong, Hurricane, A Star is Born* and —"

"That part requires a sophisticated, highly confident man that people will accept as having a long, tough history."

"No, kid, no. It requires an actor that can *look* and act sophisticated and that other stuff. You can do it. Worst that can happen is that they'll test you. They've agreed. You're a dead ringer for your old man. They're planning on getting a lot of mileage out of that. If this goes — and why shouldn't it? — they'll sign you to a long term and remake all of your old man's pictures! You'll be a star, rich and —"

"Stan —"

"Is it money? They're talking only forty-two five for this first one, kid — and I talked them up from twenty-eight — but they'll go higher, a *lot* higher, on the rest of the flicks, kid, and —"

"No, Stan."

"Kid, I guarantee you half a mil within a year, my word on it, if everything goes according to plan."

"Forget it. I'm not going to be a surrogate for my father."

"A what? Listen, they plan to have a premiere at the Chinese, big, just like the original, Norm. That Rolls of his is owned by either Liberace or Harrah, can't remember which; they'll get it for the opening. It's nostalgia done Big, let me tell you. The budget on this one is —"

"I'm me, Stan, not my father."

"Kid, kid, this is *it*, what we've both been waiting for. I don't want to hype it too much, fella, but I *sweated* this one."

"So long, Stan."

"Norm, I'm coming over —"

Junior hung up and sighed deeply. He staggered into the kitchen and found he was out of orange juice. He opened a can of tomato juice and poured it over ice. He needed distraction, something to keep him from thinking about the Universal deal. *Why* didn't he want to do it? Didn't he want to have adventures like his father? Wasn't this the chance to do just that? But he didn't want to *be* his father... .

He flicked on the TV and collapsed into the couch, washing the taste from his mouth with the tomato juice, which this morning

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tasted like liquid flannel. He blinked as the announcer said what the Morning Movie was.

Plainsclothes Killer. One of the potboilers Senior had made when he was on the slide, a late Forties black-and-white cheapie, brightened only by the "new realism" of the cop-type pictures of the time. Although Junior remembered the story as being about a cop who killed dope pushers and rapists because they were getting released by the courts, the film seemed to be about a cop who investigated a murder on a movie lot. Regis Toomey had been the killer, the cop paired with Senior, but now he stayed in the background, smoking a pipe and looking alert. In the course of the investigations on the lot Raymond Walburn said, "An actor is much better off than an ordinary human being, Lieutenant. He isn't stuck with the ordinary fellow he really is."

His father, looking only slightly puffy, pushed back his wide-brimmed hat, ran a finger over the thin Lee Bowman mustache they had made him grow for the picture, and said, "The only way to handle actors is to send them to bed without their applause." The film went on, carved into five-minute chunks by greedy stations, until the final minutes, when Senior gathered everyone together on the sound stage — Junior remembered it as a hotel lobby — and told everyone who the killer was. Toomey made a break for it, there was a brief gunfight and justice had been served.

Senior stood under a single spot, and the camera drifted slowly down from a high crane shot to a close-up, isolating Senior against black. "If you can be nothing more than you are, you must be careful to be all that you can be," he said, looking into the lens. "If I had a son, I'd tell him that. I'd tell him never to eat at a place called Mom's or play cards with anyone named Doc, or Slick. I'd tell him never to sleep with a woman whose troubles were worse than his own, to be wary of strangers who call you 'friend' and people who smile too much or too little. I'd tell him that things most taken for granted need the most to be doubted. I'd tell him to do only what he really wanted to do, and that which is right, and to do it to the best of his ability."

The end music was rising, and Norman Manford, Senior, looked out of the screen at Norman Manford, Junior. He smiled and winked "Here's looking at you, kid." Then he turned and walked away, out of the light, and the end credits rolled.

On came a deodorant commercial that implied that no one ever fell in love or got laid unless they

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had sealed armpits. Morris was being jowly and finnicky. The news. Promo for a feature coming soon. Stanley pounding on the apartment door.

Junior didn't get up. He was sluggish and slack-jawed. After a while Stan went away, but not before pleading and cursing. Try this gentle laxative. This soap. This razor blade would make your jaw like a baby's ass. The day went on. Junior turned from channel to channel, restlessly, nervously, waiting for the other shoe to drop. There *had* to be another shoe. He felt unfinished, dangling, half-made.

The early news, the sitcoms, the police shows that had cops on them like none Junior had ever met, the late news. Johnny Carson.

Only Johnny wasn't on tonight. Instead, there would be a Special NBC Presentation. Fanfare. Norman Manford in *Buccaneers of the Crimson Sea.* Junior signed deeply and sat back, the tension draining out of him. He watched, impatient at the opening commercials, then licking his lips as the titles came on. He no longer felt surprised or bewildered; it seemed right somehow.

Searchlights erratic over the Twentieth Century Fox Flash Gordon logo set. Letters in blood red, slashed on freely, old parchment background. Norman Manford, Maureen O'Hara, Claude Rains, Fay Bainter, Reginald Denny, J. Carroll Naish, Patric Knowles, Arthur Shields, Andre Morell, Anthony Quinn in a bit part. Directed by William Wyler from a script by Leigh Brackett. A three-master against the great blue sea. White clouds. Senior on the deck, Arthur Shields at the helm, Naish pointing out the Spanish fleet. Cut to Claude Rains in a Spanish uniform and a dark, pointed beard, giving the order to fire upon the pirate rabble. Smoke, good miniatures, a shattered mainmast, a tear in Senior's white dueling shirt. Outgunned, outnumbered by the Spanish fleet of pirate hunters, Senior has his ship blown out from under him. A sudden storm is the only thing that saves Senior and his key men from being taken prisoner. They escape on a tangle of wreckage. Fade-out.

Junior stared, breathing shallowly. The picture hadn't been like that at all. Maureen O'Hara had been taken prisoner; Fay Bainter her *duenna,* Reginald Denny her irate father. They had been double-crossed during the ransom negotiations and — Junior shook his head, blinking. But the little screen was like Panavision, widescreen, Cinerama. It was like being there.

Fade-in. Senior was lying un-

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conscious on a white beach, washed by waves. Waving green trees, Max Steiner music, inviting winds, strange odors. Senior stirred, awoke, looked around, right into camera.

"You survived too, eh, lad?"

"Yes, father."

"Come, then." He got to his feet, the wind blowing his dark hair. "We've got to start over, eh? That's Quinn...and Pat! Hey! over here!"

Wet, bedraggled men gathered around. "Who's the little one?"Quinn asked, squeezing the water from his dark-striped jersey.

"A stout lad to trouble Spain," Senior said. "Come on, men, there's a village around that headland. We'll borrow a longboat and find our way home. Then it's another ship, another day, and the buccaneers will sail free again!"

There was a cheer and Naish passed around a bottle of rum salvaged from the debris washed ashore. It tasted hot, hotter than the sand that burned Junior's feet. He tossed his empty beer can into the surf and watched it bobble until it filled and sank.

"Come on, boy — catch up!"

"Yes, father — coming!"

He looked back, toward where his footprints started in the soft sands of the beach. He caught a glimpse of a fading rectangle, something glowing, but it dwindled into a dot and was gone. Mirage.

Junior started slogging through the sand toward his father. He hoped he wouldn't get too bad a sunburn or be seasick. He didn't want to disgrace his father. Not now, not ever. He caught up to him, matched his stride, almost afraid to look up at him.

"Aye, laddies, a good shipmate this!" Senior stated loudly, giving Junior a whack on the shoulder. Junior grinned and walked straighter, swinging his arms, shoving his legs out briskly.

He thought for a moment he could hear music above the surf, but he wasn't certain. Korngold, maybe, or Alfred Newman. It didn't matter. There would always be music. And adventure.

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Orson Scott Card is 27; he lives with his wife in Salt Lake City, where he is an editor of the Mormon Church's magazine, The Ensign. *"Locally I am much more known as a playwright than as a writer of sf, and I have a book out from a religious/family publisher in Salt Lake. I started writing science fiction in 1976, have sold eight stories to Analog, two to F&SF, and a novel,* Hot Sleep."

Mortal Gods

by ORSON SCOTT CARD

The first contact was peaceful, almost uneventful: sudden landings near government buildings all over the world, brief discussions in the native languages, followed by treaties allowing the aliens to build certain buildings in certain places in exchange for certain favors — nothing spectacular. The technological improvements that the aliens brought helped make life better for everyone, but they were improvements that were already well within the reach of human engineers within the next decade or two. And the greatest gift of all was found to be a disappointment — space travel. The aliens did not have faster-than-light travel. Instead, they had conclusive proof that faster-than-light travel was utterly impossible. They had infinite patience and incredibly long lives to sustain them in their snail's-pace crawl among the stars, but humans would be dead before even the shortest space flight was fairly begun.

And after only a little while, the presence of aliens was regarded as quite the normal thing. They insisted that they had no further gifts to bring and simply exercised their treaty rights to build and visit the buildings that they had made.

The buildings were all different from each other but had one thing in common: by the standards of the local populace, the new alien buildings were clearly recognizable as churches.

Mosques. Cathedrals. Synagogues. Temples, both Jewish and Mormon. Churches. All unmistakably churches.

But no congregation was invited, though any person who came to such a place was welcomed

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by whatever aliens happened to be there at the time, and engaged in charming discussion totally related to the person's own interests. Farmers conversed about farming, engineers about engineering, housewives about motherhood, dreamers about dreams, travelers about travels, astronomers about the stars. Those who came and talked went away feeling good. Feeling that someone did, indeed, attach importance to their lives — had come trillions of kilometers through incredible boredom (500 years in space, they said!) just to see *them.*

And gradually life settled into a peaceful routine. Scientists, it is true, kept on discovering, and engineers kept on building according to those discoveries, and so changes *did* come. But knowing now that there was no great scientific revolution just around the corner, men and women settled down, by and large, to the business of being happy.

It wasn't as hard as people had supposed.

Willard Crane was an old man, but a content one. His wife was dead, but he did not resent the brief interregnum in his life in which he was solitary again, a thing he had not been since he came home from the Vietnam War with half a foot missing and found his girl waiting for him anyway, foot or no foot. They had lived all their married lives in a house in the Avenues of Salt Lake City, which, when they moved there, had been a shabby, dilapidated relic of a previous century, but which now was a splendid preservation of a noble era in architecture. Willard was in that comfortable area between heavy wealth and heavier poverty; enough money to satisfy normal aspirations but not enough to tempt him to extravagance.

Every day he walked from 7th Avenue and L Street to the cemetery, not far away, where practically everyone had been buried. It was there, in the middle of the cemetery, that the alien building stood — an obvious mimic of old Mormon temple architecture, meaning it was a monstrosity of conflicting periods that somehow, perhaps through intense sincerity, managed to be beautiful anyway.

And there he sat among the gravestones, watching as occasional people wandered into and out of the sanctuary where the aliens came, visited, left.

Happiness is boring as hell, he decided one day. And so, to provoke a little delightful variety, he decided to pick a fight with somebody. Unfortunately, everyone he knew at all well was far too nice to fight. And so he decided that he had a bone to pick with the aliens.

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When you're old, you can get away with anything.

He went to the alien temple and walked inside.

On the walls were murals, paintings, maps; on the floor pedestals with statues; it seemed more a museum than anything else. There were few places to sit, and he saw no sign of aliens; which wouldn't be a disaster — just deciding on a good argument had been variety enough, no need to actually have one. Willard just walked among the exhibits, noting with pride the fine quality of the work the aliens had chosen to display.

But there was an alien there, after all.

"Good morning, Mr. Crane," said the alien.

"How the hell you know my name?"

"You perch on a tombstone every morning and watch as people come in and out. We found you fascinating. We asked around." The alien's voicebox was very well programmed — a warm, friendly, interested voice. And Willard was too old and jaded with novelty to get much excited about the way the alien slithered along the floor and slopped on the bench next to him like a large, self-moving piece of seaweed.

"We wished you would come in."

"I'm in."

"And why?"

Now that the question was put, his reason seemed trivial to him, but he decided to play the game all the way through. Why not, after all? "I have a bone to pick with you."

"Heavens," said the alien, with mock horror.

"I have some questions that have never been answered to my satisfaction."

"Then I trust we'll have some answers."

"All right then." But what *were* his questions? "You'll have to forgive me if my mind gets screwed around. The brain dies first, as you know."

"We know."

"Why'd you build a temple here? How come you build churches?"

"Why, Mr. Crane, we've answered that a thousand times. We *like* churches. We find them the most graceful and beautiful of all human architecture."

"I don't believe you," Willard said. "You're dodging my question. So let me put it another way. How come you have the time to sit around and talk to half-assed imbeciles like me? Haven't you got anything better to do?"

"Human beings are unusually good company. It's a most pleasant way to pass the time which

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does, after many years, weigh rather heavily on our, um, hands." And the alien tried a gesture with his pseudopodia, which was amusing, and Willard laughed.

"Slippery bastards, aren't you?" he inquired, and the alien chuckled. "So let me put it this way, and no dodging, or I'll know you have something to hide. You're pretty much like us, right? You have the same gadgets, but you can travel in space because you don't croak after a hundred years like we do; whatever, you do pretty much the same kinds of things we do. And yet—"

"There's always an 'and yet,'" the alien sighed.

"And *yet*. You come all the way out here, which ain't exactly Main Street, Milky Way, and all you do is build these churches all over the place and sit around and jaw with whoever the hell comes in. Makes no sense, sir, none at all."

The alien oozed gently toward him. "Can you keep a secret?"

"My old lady thought she was the only woman I ever slept with in my life. Some secrets I can keep."

"Then here is one to keep. We come, Mr. Crane, to worship."

"Worship who?"

"Worship, among others, you."

Willard laughed long and loud, but the alien looked (as only aliens can) terribly earnest and sincere.

"Listen, you mean to tell me that you worship *people?*"

"Oh, yes. It is the dream of everyone who dares to dream on my home planet to come here and meet a human being or two and then live on the memory forever."

And suddenly it wasn't funny to Willard anymore. He looked around — human art in prominent display, the whole format, the choice of churches. "You aren't joking."

"No, Mr. Crane. We've wandered the galaxy for several million years, all told, meeting new races and renewing acquaintances with old. Evolution is a tedious old highway — carbon-based life always leads to certain patterns and certain forms, despite the fact that we seem hideously different to you—"

"Not too bad, mister, a little ugly, but not too bad —"

"All the — people like us that you've seen — well, we don't come from the same planet, though it has been assumed so by your scientists. Actually, we come from thousands of planets. Separate, independent evolution, leading inexorably to us. Absolutely, or nearly absolutely, uniform throughout the galaxy. We are the natural end product of evolution."

"So we're the oddballs."

"You might say so. Because somewhere along the line, Mr.

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Crane, deep in your past, your planet's evolution went astray from the normal. It created something utterly new."

"Sex?"

"We all have sex, Mr. Crane. Without it, how in the world would the race improve? No, what was new on your planet, Mr. Crane, was death."

The word was not an easy one for Willard to hear. His wife had, after all, meant a great deal to him. And he meant even more to himself. Death already loomed in dizzy spells and shortened breath and weariness that refused to turn into sleep.

"Death?"

"We don't die, Mr. Crane. We reproduce by splitting off whole sections of ourselves with identical DNA — you know about DNA?"

"I went to college."

"And with us, of course, as with all other life in the universe, intelligence is carried on the DNA, not in the brain. One of the by-products of death, the brain is. We don't have it. We split, and the individual, complete with all memories, lives on in the children, who are made up of the actual flesh of my flesh, you see? I will never die."

"Well, bully for you," Willard said, feeling strangely cheated, and wondering why he hadn't guessed.

"And so we came here and found people whose life had a finish, who began as unformed creatures without memory and, after an incredibly brief span, died."

"And for that you worship us? I might as well go worshiping bugs that die a few minutes after they're born."

The alien chuckled, and Willard resented it.

"Is that why you come here? To gloat?"

"What else would we worship, Mr. Crane? While we don't discount the possibility of invisible gods, we really never have invented any. We never died, so why dream of immortality? Here we found a people who knew how to worship, and for the first time we found awakened in us a desire to do homage to superior beings."

And Willard noticed his heartbeat, realized that it would stop while the alien had no heart, had nothing that would ever end. "Superior hell."

"We," said the alien, "remember everything, from the first stirrings of intellect to the present. When we are 'born,' so to speak, we have no need of teachers. We have never learned to write — merely to exchange RNA. We have never learned to create beauty to outlast our lives because nothing outlasts our lives. We live to see all our works crumble. Here, Mr. Crane, we have found a race that

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builds for the sheer joy of building, that creates beauty, that writes books, that invents the lives of never-known people to delight others who know they are being lied to, a race that devises immortal gods to worship and celebrates its own mortality with immense pomp and glory. Death is the foundation of all that is great about humanity, Mr. Crane."

"Like hell it is," said Willard. "I'm about to die, and there's nothing great about it."

"You don't really believe that, Mr. Crane," the alien said. "None of you do. Your lives are built around death, glorifying it. Postponing it as long as possible, to be sure, but glorifying it. In the earliest literature, the death of the hero is the moment of greatest climax. The most potent myth."

"Those poems weren't written by old men with flabby bodies and hearts that only beat when they feel like it."

"Nonsense. Everything you do smacks of death. Your poems have beginnings and endings, and structures that limit the work. Your paintings have edges, marking off where the beauty begins and ends. Your sculptures isolate a moment in time. Your music starts and finishes. All that you do is mortal — it is all born. It all dies. And yet you struggle against mortality and have overcome it, building up tremendous stores of shared knowledge through your finite books and your finite words. You put frames on everything; everything to you is born and dies."

"Mass insanity, then. But it explains nothing about why you worship. You must come here to mock us."

"Not to mock you. To envy you."

"Then die. I assume that your protoplasm or whatever is vulnerable."

"You don't understand. A human being can die — *after* he has reproduced — and all that he knew and all that he was will live on after him. But if *I* die, I cannot reproduce. My knowledge dies with me. An awesome responsibility. We cannot assume it. I *am* all the paintings and writings and songs of a million generations. To die would be the death of a civilization. You have cast yourselves free of life and achieved greatness."

"And that's why you come here."

"If ever there were gods. If ever there was power in the universe. You are those gods. You have that power."

"We have no power."

"Mr. Crane, you are beautiful."

And the old man shook his head, stood with difficulty, and doddered out of the temple and

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walked slowly among the graves.

"You tell them the truth," said the alien to no one in particular (to future generations of himself who would need the memory of the words having been spoken), "and it only makes it worse."

It was only seven months later, and the weather was no longer spring but now blustered with the icy wind of late autumn. The trees in the cemetery were no longer colorful; they were stripped of all but the last few brown leaves. And into the cemetery walked Willard Crane again, his arms half enclosed by the metal crutches that gave him, in his old age, four points of balance instead of the precarious two that had served him for more than ninety years. A few snowflakes were drifting lazily down, except when the wind snatched them and spun them in crazy dances that had neither rhythm nor direction.

Willard laboriously climbed the steps of the temple.

Inside, an alien was waiting.

"I'm Willard Crane," the old man said.

"And I'm an alien. You spoke to me — or my parent, however you wish to phrase it — several months ago."

"Yes."

"We knew you'd come back."

"Did you? I vowed I never would."

"But we know you. You are well-known to us all, Mr. Crane. There are billions of gods on Earth for us to worship, but you are the noblest of them all."

"I am?"

"Because only you have thought to do us the kindest gift. Only you are willing to let us watch your death."

And a tear leaped from the old man's eye as he blinked heavily.

"Is that why I came?"

"Isn't it?"

"I thought I came to damn your souls to hell, that's why I came, you bastards, coming to taunt me in the final hours of my life."

"You came to us."

"I wanted to show you how ugly death is."

"Please. Do."

And, seemingly eager to oblige them, Willard's heart stopped, and he, in brief agony, slumped to the floor of the temple.

The aliens all slithered in, all gathered around closely, watching him rattle for breath.

"I will not die!" he savagely whispered, each breath an agony, his face fierce with the heroism of struggle.

And then his body shuddered and he was still.

The aliens knelt there for hours in silent worship as the body became cold. And then, at last, be-

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cause they had learned this from their gods — that words must be said to be remembered — one of them spoke:

"Beautiful," he said tenderly. "Oh Lord my God," he said worshipfully.

And they were gnawed by the grief of knowing that this greatest of all gifts was forever out of their reach.

INVERSE UNIVERSE

Paul was born in Libra.

He died in Libra.

He had a mole on his left hand

He was no years old.

and one gold tooth.

when he erupted back into the womb.

When he was twenty, he got married

He was watching a doctor

as was the custom.

five feet shorter than he was.

When he was twenty-one, he had a son.

Eventually he got to be

When he was thirty-three,

It made him think.

he read a short story

called THE INVERSE UNIVERSE.

about anti-matter

about anti-matter,

called *THE INVERSE UNIVERSE.*

he read a short story

It made him think.

When he was twenty-eight,

Eventually his son got to be

When he was forty, he lost his son.

two inches taller than him.

as was the custom.

He was watching a sitcom

When he was forty-one, he got married

when his heart erupted.

and one enamel tooth.

He was sixty-one.

He had a mole on his right hand

He died in Taurus.

Paul was born in Taurus.

—WILLIAM JON WATKINS

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Concerning the first case for Neil Purley's computerized detection firm, which guaranteed to find the lost within one hour, or your money back . . .

While-You-Wait

by EDWARD WELLEN

When the multinational conglomerate took over the firm Neil Purley had helped build into something worth taking over and told him, in effect, "Sorry, Social Security No. 129-03-7652, but there's nothing you can do that a computer can't do better and more cheaply," Purley burned with a cold flame. If man was no match for the computer's speed, the computer was no match for man's tricky mind.

He would show them. It went deeper than that. He would show himself as well. A man's insight, intelligence, intuition should not go for nothing, be of nothing worth, wither for want of use.

With his severance pay he rented space, leased equipment, ran an ad. And waited for his first client.

The conglomerate would be his unwitting ally. He would be using the conglomerate's identifying codewords to gain illegal access to the computer. He nicened it up by thinking of it as "timesharing in an unauthorized manner." Still, the upholders of law and order would not look kindly on that. So for safety's sake he had set up his office on the cheesebox principle.

Just as bookies interpose unmanned phones, Purley interposed closed-circuit television. The office the ad directed you to held only a cathode-ray-tube screen, a TV camera, and a client's chair. Purley himself sat at a time-division multiple-access data link in another part of town. The connection would break at the first sign of trouble. The law would never catch Purley red-handed — or touch-tone-fingered.

And that was why his first client seemed slightly puzzled when an image on the screen welcomed him. Parenthetically, the image looked nothing like Purley.

"Please sit down."

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The man did not sit down. He held a clipping up to the camera eye. "This mean what it says?"

It said: *WHILE-U-WAIT Computerized Detecting. One-hour maximum per case. The lost found. Fee: (includes all expenses) $500 certified check. Satisfactory job or your money refunded.* And gave the address.

The image smiled. "It means what it says. Let me add up front, though, that we're not a detective agency and don't have a license to operate as such. We don't send operatives gumshoeing around. We're purely and simply a data-processing service that specializes in retrieving information from data banks to help clients retrieve persons, places, and things. We *locate,* in other words; the physical retrieval is up to you."

The man nodded. "That's all I want you to do for me — locate someone, and fast."

"You've brought your certified check for five hundred dollars? Kindly place it in the escrow slot. That's it." Purley scanned the signature, saw the man's name was Albert Uhl. "Now, Mr. Uhl, take note of the time. If we fail to locate your someone inside one hour, you get your check back. All right, Mr. Uhl, who are you looking for?"

Uhl sat down before the visual display. He gave the image a slightly dubious smile, as though suspecting WHILE-U-WAIT relied more on theatrics than on technology. But his need appeared greater than his doubt. He wanted to believe WHILE-U-WAIT would help him. And if he had to pay extra for his need by submitting himself to showmanship, he was willing to do so. But he looked a man who would demand results. He leaned forward.

"I'm trying to locate a friend of mine. He's playing around with another man's wife." He paused. "This is all just between us?"

"Of course. Privileged communication. Go on, Mr. Uhl."

"My friend went abroad to meet the woman. What he doesn't know is that the husband knows about them. This husband can be violent. He has a temper — and a gun to go with it. I'm anxious to get in touch with my friend and head him off before he runs into trouble. Only my trouble is I don't know just where he is or what name he's using." He leaned back.

Purley kept the image smiling but in his own person he grimaced in dismay. "We have to have *something* to go on, Mr. Uhl. There can't be feedback without input."

"Sure, I realize that." Swiftly and smoothly Uhl produced a snapshot. "That's why I brought this It came from somewhere abroad about a week ago. All you

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have to do is figure out the exact spot it shows. I'll do the rest."

The snapshot, amateurishly blurry, showed a man standing in front of a thatch-roofed cottage. Purley zoomed in on the snapshot. That gave him a bigger blur. He grimaced again, then tapped out instructions for the computer to enhance the snapshot electronically, sharpen it up to make the man's features and those of his surroundings as clear as possible. While the computer worked on the snapshot, Purley picked up on his client.

"That's all you have to go on?"

"Yes."

"Let's try it from the other angles of the triangle. I gather the husband is shadowing the wife to the rendezvous. We can trace them through plane or ship bookings and hotel reservations. You can take a fast jet there and be on the lookout for your friend to warn him. What's the husband's name?"

Uhl frowned. He shook his head. "I don't know that. If I did I wouldn't need you."

"I see." Purley did not see anything but a total blur. If all his cases were going to be like this first one, maybe he had bitten off more than he could chew. "All right, let's see if you can give me a description of your friend."

Uhl's frown deepened. "You have the snapshot."

The image smiled patiently. "It doesn't tell me his age, eye color, height, weight — a few little details like those."

Purley presented a display on the screen in place of the image. The display consisted of a list of physical and social characteristics — sex, race, age, marital status, height, build, weight, complexion, eye color, hair color, scars, and so on. He asked Uhl to take up the light pen attached to the set and tick off his friend's profile.

Something in the tigerish way Uhl moved, the man's reflexes, plus his almost willful lack of helpful input, the failure to supply the husband's name, gave Purley to think again. He did not let the light pen work.

"Sorry, Mr. Uhl. The light pen seems to be out of order. But the computer can sense it just as well if you use your finger."

Uhl hesitated a fraction of a second, then touched his finger to the screen to indicate his friend's characteristics.

"Fine." Purley winked out the display and presented his surrogate image again. "While we work on what we have, you can relax and listen to music. Do you have any preferences?"

The man stared. "No, no preferences."

"All right." Purley faded the

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image from the screen and let Uhl enjoy Montevani and colored lights that pulsed to the soothing strains.

Purley himself felt far from relaxed. Uhl bothered him. While working on locating Uhl's friend, it would not hurt to get a make on Uhl.

Besides recording Uhl's state of tension in his finger tremors as he touched the screen, the computer had registered Uhl's fingerprint. Uhl seemed the right age and the right physique to have served in Vietnam. Subsidiaries of the conglomerate that had found Purley redundant did national defense work. If you knew the codeword, you had access to Department of Defense files. Purley knew the codeword. He had the computer classify Uhl's fingerprint and look for the print's match among the whorls, loops, and arches of all those who had served in the armed forces.

It took two minutes. The fingerprint matched the right index finger of one Steve Kinzel.

Purley retrieved Kinzel's service record. Kinzel had received a less-than-honorable discharge from the Army — but not before winning every sharpshooting award the Army had to offer.

Using the conglomerate's plant-security contact with the FBI — another codeword — Purley patched into the National Criminal Identification Center in Washington.

Steve Kinzel's FBI yellow sheet showed that the FBI's antisyndicate task force suspected Kinzel of being a hit man with a long string of contracts to his credit. Never caught in the act.

Purley eyed Uhl-Kinzel through the camera:—The man sat seemingly relaxed, sound-bathing. A sunning snake looks relaxed. Purley felt a hollow tightness in his belly.

The hit-man angle would seem to rule out the possibility Purley had been considering — that his client was the husband in the story he had fed Purley.

But the purpose in hiring WHILE-U-WAIT remained the same. Even stronger. To locate and waste the "friend."

Purley turned to the enhanced snapshot on one of his screens. The computer had made a number of identifications and deductions.

The architecture put the cottage in the British Isles. The thatched roof was not of the kind you find in Suffolk, Essex, or Cambridgeshire; there the roof cocks up at the gable end. This cottage stood rather in a western or southwestern county, where the gables droop or have hipped hoods. That narrowed it down to Cornwall, Devon, or Somersetshire.

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The gentle swells of land visible in the distance further narrowed it down to Somersetshire. Purley blew up white dots on the nearest slope into grazing sheep — Southdown breed, the computer said after a nanosecond's glance at its memory banks.

A speck in the snapshot's sky blew up into a seagull. The computer gazed at its gazetteer. The hills would be the Mendip Hills, the seagull's drink would be the Mouth of the Severn.

In short, the cottage stood on property near a Southdown sheep pasturage some five miles southeast of Weston-super-Mare.

The front of the cottage had a freshly whitewashed look. The man posing in front of it had probably just recently taken possession. The foliage of the oak tree dominating the grounds told Purley the man had taken possession of it in early spring. The shape of the oak tree also showed the orientation — the northern branches reaching for light, the southern branches taking it easy. Therefore the road the cottage faced on ran east and west.

Shadows showed it to be midafternoon; they also helped Purley and the computer, using the man's height as a yardstick, to determine the dimensions of the cottage. Only the man's identity remained in shadow.

Purley turned to his "blue box," an electronic device for placing overseas calls without paying for them. He put through a call to Taunton, the county town of Somersetshire.

There Purley found an obliging records clerk. The important sound of "overseas call," plus Purley's tone of urgency, proved contagious. Inside of five minutes she identified the property from Purley's detailed description and came up with the name of the present owner of Oak Cottage.

Roger Nugent.

It was all over. Investigation successfully completed, fee earned. He had not bitten off more than he could chew. Purley now had all the information his client wanted. All that remained was to astonish the client by letting the image smile modestly and say, "Your man is Roger Nugent, at Oak Cottage, between Weston-super-Mare and Axbridge, in Somerset, England."

Purley stole another look at Uhl-Kinzel. He saw beneath the relaxed form the unsoothed beast. Purley glanced at the hour. He decided to stall the man another ten minutes.

Through the computer of a correspondent bank obligating and obligated to the conglomerate, Purley determined that Roger Nugent had paid for Oak Cottage with funds from a Taunton bank

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account. Purley backtracked the deposits, following a suspiciously complex trail.

He traced the laundered money in Nugent's account ultimately to a U.S. Justice Department special fund. The pattern of payments told him Roger Nugent's name had been Larry Shedd.

Now Purley knew why his client had been shy about telling WHILE-U-WAIT the missing man's name up front. Anyone who kept up with the news would have recognized the name Larry Shedd and have realized the phoniness of the love-triangle tale.

Larry Shedd, before disappearing and surfacing as Roger Nugent, had testified before a Senate committee looking into the activities of a leading crime-syndicate figure, Vincent Minturn. Minturn, according to "reliable sources," had put an open $500,000 contract out on Larry Shedd.

Because of this contract, the Justice Department had paid for plastic surgery on Larry Shedd, spirited him out of the country, and set him up under a new identity. Away from hit men, away from front pages.

WHILE-U-WAIT's client was not a newspaperman. His reason for discovering Shedd's present identity and whereabouts was not to expand on Shedd's life story but to contract Shedd's life span.

WHILE-U-WAIT's client's client had to be Vincent Minturn.

Purley glanced again at the hour and quickly followed up the Minturn lead.

A search of the computerized morgue of the largest wire service — the conglomerate whose facilities Purley was borrowing owned newspapers and radio and TV stations — turned up that Minturn, like Shedd, was hiding out under another name somewhere overseas.

Minturn had slipped out from under FBI and Interpol surveillance to evade a grand jury investigation arising out of the Senate hearings. Minturn had often voiced his love for the American way of life and his scorn for all other ways, but he dared not risk returning as long as Shedd lived to testify against him. The $500,000 contract was a measure of that love.

Purley smiled an unlovely smile. It had hit him that Minturn and the conglomerate had a lot in common. Money was root, stem, and flower of the evil they did. He had no self-pity, but he thought *poor Shedd.*

While he was at it, he had the computer look up everything the wire-service morgue had on Shedd. The latest reference to the vanished Shedd appeared in an item about a minor burglary a week ago at a Chicago nursing home. The minor

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burglary had a major outcome. Larry Shedd's aging and ailing mother had died of shock shortly after the intrusion, though as far as anyone knew, nothing of any worth was missing.

Purley knew what was missing.

The snapshot.

Shedd-Nugent had mailed it to his failing and fearful mother to reassure her that he was alive and well and doing fine...somewhere. He must have had sense enough to arrange for the envelope to bear a misleading postmark. Otherwise, Uhl would not have needed WHILE-U-WAIT's help.

A thought burned bright in Purley's mind. But for it to become deed required Minturn's present identity and whereabouts.

Purley had not even a blurred amateurish snapshot to help him locate Minturn. A glance at the hour told him time was running out.

He staked all on his only handle on Minturn — Minturn's yearning for America.

According to news accounts, Minturn had haunted the hangouts of the show-biz crowd. He would be homesick for those haunts, eager for some reminder or taste of them.

Again Purley twitched the conglomerate's tentacles. He traced all overseas air shipments of Lindy's cheesecake, Nathan's hot dogs, and Stage Door Delicatessen pastrami in the past month. He narrowed the field to one Frank Fratto in Rome.

Fratto's Rome bank account led back to a Stateside account of Vincent Minturn's that Minturn had cleaned out just before disappearing. Fratto's handwriting on his bank signature card matched Minturn's on his — there were distinctive *t*'s. The computer gave it as a 98.6666 percent probability that Frank Fratto was Vincent Minturn.

The man's checking account gave Purley the man's present address — a Rome hotel. The checks led Purley to invoices of places where Fratto shopped. Among the earliest purchases were a red-brown wig and prescription sunglasses. Best of all, the measurements on file at the leading Rome tailor's for Fratto's new suits reassured Purley that Fratto had roughly Nugent's build.

Purley switched off Montevani and the lights and threw his smiling surrogate image at his client.

Uhl leaned forward. "The hour's up. Do you have a name and a place?"

Purley gave him a name and — "He's not where you might think he'd be" — a place.

Uhl sat staring at the image. "Are you sure you got the right man?"

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The image drew itself up. "We're 98.6666 percent sure."

Uhl smiled. "That's good enough for me." He got up to go but stopped to shake his head. "I wish I knew how you —" He shrugged. "No time. I have to catch a plane. So long."

"Good-by."

Purley watched Uhl set out toward his doom. He sat bemused awhile, then stirred himself to forge and send an IPCQ alert — Interpol Paris to all national bureaus — warning the *carabinieri* in Italy to be on the lookout for the arrival of Steve Kinzel, a.k.a. Albert Uhl, suspected hit man. The Italian police would tail him and should catch him red-handed, trigger-fingered, gunning down Frank Fratto, a.k.a. Vincent Minturn.

WHILE-U-WAIT awaited its next client.

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BAIRD SEARLES

Films and Television

WHIMSY TWO

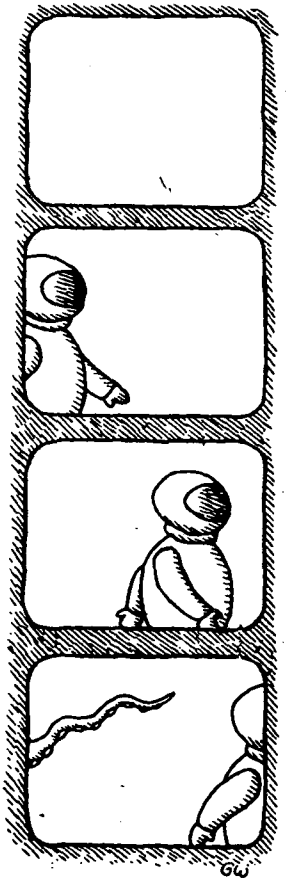
whim-sy *n.* 1. an odd fancy; idle notion; whim 2. curious, quaint, or fanciful humor*

Last month we touched on whimsy in the form of the mass market cuteness of the '40s movie, revived (but not updated) in *Heaven Can Wait.*

But as Sam Gamgee says, "There's elves *and* elves" and there's whimsy *and* whimsy. Adult fantasy and s/f fans, though they may indulge, keep their whimsy intake rather quiet generally, a defensive approach brought on by the fact that the outer world all too often considers *adult* fantasy childish.

Each generation has its own whimsies, usually aimed at children, but sometimes so transcendently working on two levels that adults will cherish them, too. Carroll's *Alice* and Anderson's Fairy Tales were 19th century whimsies. In the early part of this century, the English maintained their mastery of the genre with *Peter Pan* and its overtly Freudian cuteness, the gentle humor of *Winnie, the Pooh,* and the sublimely ridiculous *Wind in the Willows.*

The '30s brought a change in



*Webster's New World Dictionary, Second College Edition.

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media, taste and culture; the crude but vigorous Disney comedies made film *the* medium for whimsy, and the war years created a need for more, filled by the above mentioned live action films that gave us heavenly messengers in the form of Cary Grant, Claude Rains and Jack Benny (!), leprechauns, and musical comedy Venuses and Terpsichores.

Then came television, and one of its first great hits was the whimsical genius of Burr Tillistrom and his family of puppets; they *were* a family, each one of whose personalities one grew to know and love. This was whimsy at its finest. (One of the nicest moments of my life was a private meeting with Kukla and Ollie in a room at the Plaza. Don't tell *me* they're not people!)

On the literary side, the intellectuals of the period, who wouldn't be caught dead watching TV, were lauding E.B. White's *Stuart Little* and *Charlotte's Web* as that particular generation's best whimsical works; the charm of both has always escaped me. About then the endless stream of Dr. Seuss books began to appear, and Tove Jansson's marvelously mad Moomitrolls captured England, but left most Americans cold (but not this one).

The '60s weren't much for whimsy, but sometime during that decade I began to be aware of the guest appearances of a peculiar crowd called the Muppets; I remember falling hopelessly in love with a frog named Kermit, in a very early special that was a rather dippy adaptation of a fairy tale.

Despite that early infatuation, I never did quite come to terms with the Muppets. With standards set by the Kuklapolitans, this new crowd seemed to me a mite too slick, and there were so *many* of them. Tillstrom's little repertory company were each and every one individuals; I couldn't quite sort out this messy mob of Muppets, though I realized early on that the guiding spirit behind them was endlessly inventive and technically quite astonishing. These creatures were doing things that I'd never seen puppets do before.

Even when they got their own show two years ago, I didn't pay too much attention. The 7:30 p.m. time slot seemed an assurance of a kiddy orientation, and, at the same time, I was alternately amused and repelled by the Muppet turn on *Saturday Night Live.* This group of repulsive reptilian thingies who lived in a volcanic landscape and worshipped an animate idol who would take (not to mention swallow) almost anything went beyond whimsy toward adult fantasy (in a sophomoric sort of way), but like everything on that particular show,

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seemed plagued by a determined lack of taste.

But this last season, I have succumbed entirely to the charm of The Muppet Show. I still have trouble sorting out the cast of thousands, but what an impressive opening curtain that horde makes. I'm till in love with Kermit and, being an orderly Taurus type, also adore a messy person called Animal. The Scandanavian chef breaks me up without fail; "Pigs in Space" is a wonderful send up of Star Trek and is always just short enough not to wear itself out.

The half of the program that is given over to interaction between the Muppets and their human guests predictably varies in quality, and it's interesting to see who works out and who doesn't. Elton John didn't, while Nureyev, oddly, did (his "Swine Lake" with Miss Piggy was a high point). Bob Hope bombed, while Juliet Prowse out-Lili'd Lili and, in one of the rare Muppet moments not aimed at comedy, danced with a corps of gazelle-like creatures in a truly beautiful choreographic moment.

I think the point at which I knew that the Muppets had me was just last week, when I suddenly realized that I was thoroughly convinced that the orchestra of creatures behind Cleo Laine was making those extraordinary noises, and it took an act of will to intellectually assure myself that they were really inanimate objects.

So thank you, Jim Henson & Co., for proving that sweet whimsy need not be lacking in an unpleasant and ugly age. Muppets forever!

Literary dept...By the time this sees print, there will be a book on the Muppets out, and since it comes from the indefatigable and expert Ian and Betty Ballantine, it's almost sure to be as delightful as its subjects.

Late, late show dept...A rare treat last week: the 1936 film of H.G. Wells' *The Man Who Could Work Miracles.* Wells himself did the script as he did for *Things To Come,* and while this is a much less epic tale, of a man who is given the power of doing *anything* and the inevitable mess he makes of it (like destroying the Earth), it's still wonderful to see a filmic statement by a legendary literary figure. I'd forgotten the intriguing prologue, in which three celestial Beings (one a very young George Sanders) muse on the tiny creatures that inhabit the globe floating before them which is stated to be in the care of one of them, subject to a higher power, a very Lewis and Tolkien bit of theology surprising for Wells.

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Robert Aickman, master of the macabre tale ("The Hospice," April 1976; "Marriage," April 1978), returns with a story about a young woman who has had a bad love affair and asks: "What is the way to mend a broken heart?" And receives the answer: "To kill the man who has broken it . . ."

Hand In Glove

by ROBERT AICKMAN

... that subtle gauzy haze which one only finds in Essex.

— Sir Henry Channon

When Millicent finally broke it off with Nigel and felt that the last tiny bit of meaning had ebbed from her life (apart, of course, from her job), it was natural that Winifred should suggest a picnic, combined with a visit, "not too serious," as Winifred put it, to a Great House. Millicent realized that there was no alternative to clutching at the idea and vouchsafed quite effectively the expected blend of pallor and gratitude. She was likely to see much more of Winifred in the future, provided always that Winifred did not somehow choose this precise moment to dart off in some new direction.

Everyone knew about Millicent and Nigel and took it for granted, so that now she was peacefully allotted an odd day or two off, despite the importance of what she did. After all, she had been linked with Nigel, in one way or another, for a long time; and the deceptively small gradations between the different ways were the business only of the two parties. Winifred, on the other hand, had quite a struggle to escape, but she persisted because she realized how much it must matter to Millicent. There are too many people about to make it sensible to assess most kinds of employment objectively. In one important respect, Winifred's life was simpler than Millicent's: "I have never been in love," she would say. "I really don't understand about it." Indeed, the matter arose but rarely, and less often now than ten or twelve years ago.

"What about Baddeley End?" suggested Winifred, attempting a black joke, inducing the ghost of a smile. Winifred had seldom supposed that the Nigel business would

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end other than as it had.

"Perfect," said Millicent, entering into the spirit, extending phantom hands in gratitude.

"I'll look on the map for a picnic spot," said Winifred. Winifred had found picnic spots for them in the Cevennes, the Apennines, the Dolomites, the Sierra de Guadarrama, even the Carpathians. Incidentally, it was exactly the kind of thing at which Nigel was rather hopeless. Encountering Nigel, one seldom forgot the bull and the gate.

"We'd better use my car," continued Winifred. "Then you'll only have to do what you want to do."

And at first, upon the face of it, things had all gone charmingly as always. Millicent could be in no doubt of that. It is difficult at these times to know which to prefer: friends who understand (up to a point) or those who do not understand at all and thus offer their own kind of momentary escape.

Winifred brought the car to a stand at the end of a long lane, perhaps even bridle path, imperfectly surfaced, at least for modern traffic, even though they were no further from their respective flats than somewhere in Essex. She had been carrying a great part of their route in her head. Now she was envisaging the picnic site.

"It's a rather pretty spot," she said with confidence. "There's a right of way, or at least a footpath, through the churchyard and down to the river."

"What river is it?" enquired Millicent idly.

"It's only a stream. Well, perhaps a *little* more than that. It's called the Waste."

"Is it really?"

"Yes, it is. Can you please hand me out the rucksack?"

In hours of freedom, Winifred always packed things into a rucksack, where earlier generations would have prepared a luncheon basket or a cabin trunk.

"I'm sorry I've made no contribution," said Millicent, not for the first time.

"Don't be foolish," said Winifred.

"At least let me carry something?"

"All right, the half bottle and the glasses. I couldn't get them in."

"How sweet of you," said Millicent. Potation was normally eschewed in the middle of the day.

"I imagine we go through the kissing gate."

From even that accepted locution Millicent slightly shrank.

The iron kissing gate stood beside the wooden lich gate, opened only on specific occasions.

With the ancient church on their right, little, low, and lichened, they descended the track between

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the graves. The path had at one time been paved with bricks, but many of the bricks were now missing, and weeds grew between the others.

"It's very slippery," said Millicent. "I shouldn't like to have to hurry back up." It was appropriate that she should make a remark of some kind, should show that she was still alive.

"It can't really be slippery. It hasn't rained for weeks."

Millicent had to admit the truth of that.

"Perhaps it would be better if I were to go first?" continued Winifred. "Then you could take your time with the glasses. Sorry they're so fragile."

"*You* know where we're going," responded Millicent, falling into second place.

"We'll look inside the church before we leave."

Though ivy had begun to entangle the mossy little church like a steathily encroaching octopus, Millicent had to admit that the considerable number of apparently new graves suggested the continuing usefulness of the building. On the other hand, the plastered rectory or vicarage to their left, behind the dangerous-looking hedge, was stained and grimed, and with no visible open window on this almost ideal day.

Whatever Winifred might say, the churchyard seemed very moist. But then much of Essex is heavy clay. Everyone in the world knows that.

At the far end was another kissing gate, very creaky and arbitrary, and, beyond, a big, green, sloping field. There were cows drawn together in the far, upper corner: "a mixed lot of animals," as Millicent's stepfather would have put it in the old days — the very old days they seemed at that moment.

Down the emerald field ran no visible track, but Winifred, with the dotted map in the forefront of her mind, pursued a steady course. Millicent knew from experience that at the bottom of Winifred's rucksack was a spacious groundsheet. It seemed just as well.

Winifred led the way through an almost nonexistent gate to the left and along a curious muddy passage between rank hedges down to the brink of the river.

Here there were small islands of banked mud with tall plants growing on them that looked almost tropical, and, to the right, a crumbling stone bridge, with an ornament of some kind upon the central panel. Rich, heavy foliage shaded the scene, but early dragonflies glinted across vague streaks of sunlight.

"The right of way goes over the bridge," remarked Winifred, "but we might do better on this side."

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Sedgy and umbrous, the picnic spot was romantic in the extreme; most unlikely of discovery even at so short a distance from the human hive, from their own north side of the Park. After the repast, one might well seek the brittle bones of once-loitering knights; or one might aforetime have done that, when one had the energy and the faith. Besides, Millicent had noticed that the bridge was obstructed from end to end by rusty barbed wire, with long spikes, mostly bent.

In repose on the groundsheet, they were a handsome pair: trim; effective; still, despite everything, expectant. They wore sweaters in plain colors and stained, familiar trousers. In the symphony of Millicent's abundant hair were themes of pale grey. Winifred's stout tow was at all times sturdily neutral. A poet lingering upon the bridge might have felt sad that life had offered them no more. Few people can pick out, merely from the lines on a map, so ideal a region for a friend's grief. Few people can look so sensuous in sadness as Millicent, away from the office, momentarily oblivious to its ambiguous, paranoid satisfactions.

It had indeed been resourceful of Winifred to buy and bring the half bottle, but Millicent found that the noontide wine made no difference. How could it? How could anything? Almost anything?

But then —

"Winifred! Where have all these mushrooms come from?"

"I expect they were there when we arrived."

"I'm quite certain they were not."

"Of course they were," said Winifred. "Mushrooms grow fast but not *that* fast."

"They were not. I shouldn't have sat down if they had been. I don't like sitting among a lot of giant mushrooms."

"They're quite the normal size," said Winifred, smiling and drawing up her legs. "Would you like to go?"

"Well, we *have* finished the picnic," said Millicent. "Thanks very much, Winifred, it was lovely."

They rose: two exiled dryads, the poet on the bridge might have said. On their side on the shallow, marshy, wandering river were mushrooms as far as the eye could see, downstream and up, though it was true that in neither direction could the eye see very far along the bank, being impeded one way by the bridge and the other by the near-jungle.

"It"s the damp," said Millicent. "Everything is so terribly damp."

"If it is," said Winifred, "it must be always like it, because there's been very little rain. I said that before."

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Millicent felt ashamed of herself, as happened the whole time now. "It was very clever of you to find such a perfect place," she said immediately. "But you always do. Everything was absolutely for the best until the mushrooms came."

"I'm not really sure that they *are* mushrooms," said Winifred. "Perhaps merely fungi."

"Let's not put it to the test," said Millicent. "Let's go. Oh, I'm so sorry. You haven't finished repacking."

Duly, the ascent was far more laborious. "Tacky" was the word that Millicent's stepfather would have applied to the going.

"Why do all the cows stay clustered in one corner?" asked Millicent. "They haven't moved one leg since we arrived."

"It's to do with the flies," said Winifred knowledgeably.

"They're not waving their tails about. They're not tossing their heads. They're not lowing. In fact, they might be stuffed or modeled."

"I expect they're chewing the cud, Millicent."

"I don't think they are." Millicent of course really knew more of country matters than Winifred.

"I'm not sure they're there at all," said Millicent.

"Oh, hang on, Millicent," said Winifred, without, however, ceasing to plod and without even looking back at Millicent over her shoulder, let alone at the distant cows.

Millicent knew that people were being kind to her and that it was an unsuitable moment for her to make even the smallest fuss, except perhaps a fun-fuss, flattering to the other party.

They reached the wilful kissing gate at the bottom of the churchyard. It made its noise as soon as it was even touched and clanged back spitefully at Millicent when Winifred had passed safely through it.

Millicent had not remembered the gate's behavior on their outward trip. Probably one tackled things differently according to whether one was descending or ascending.

But —

"Winifred, look!"

Millicent, so carefully self-contained the entire day, had all but screamed.

"None of that was there just now."

She could not raise her arm to point. Ahead of them, to the left of the ascending craggy path through the churchyard, was a pile of wreaths and sprays, harps wrought from lilies, red roses twisted into hearts, irises concocted into archangel trumpets. Commerce and the commemorative instinct could hardly collaborate further.

"You didn't notice it," replied

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Winifred uopn the instant. She even added, as at another time that day she certainly would not have done, "Your mind was on other things." She then looked over her shoulder at Millicent and smiled.

"They weren't there," said Millicent, more sure of her facts than of herself. "There's been a funeral while we were by the river."

"I think we'd have heard something," replied Winifred, still smiling. "Besides you don't bury people in the lunch hour."

"Well, something's happened."

"Last time you just didn't notice," replied Winifred, turning away and looking ahead of her at the weedy path. "That's all."

The challenge was too much for Millicent's resolutions of mousiness. "Well, did *you?*" she enquired.

But Winifred had prepared herself. "I'm not sure whether I did or didn't, Millicent. Does it matter?"

Winifred took several steps forward and then asked, "Would you rather give the church a miss?"

"Not at all," replied Millicent. "Inside there might be an explanation of some kind."

Millicent was glad she was in the rear, because at first she had difficulty in passing the banked-up tributes. They all looked so terribly new. The oblong mound beneath them was concealed, but one could scarcely doubt that it was there. At first, the flowers seemed to smell as if they were unforced and freshly picked, not like proper funerary flowers at all, which either smell not, or smell merely of accepted mortality. But then, on second thoughts, or at a second intake of Millicent's breath, the smell was not exactly as of garden or even of hedgerow flowers either. After a few seconds, the smell seemed as unaccountable as the sudden apparition of the flowers themselves. Certainly it was not in the least a smell that Millicent would have expected or could ever much care for.

She noticed that Winifred was stumping along, still looking at the battered bricks beneath her feet.

Millicent hesitated. "Perhaps we ought to inspect some of the cards?" she suggested.

That must have been a mischievous idea because this time Winifred just walked on in silence. And, as a matter of fact, Millicent had to admit to herself that she could in any case see no cards attached to the flowers, and whatever else might be attached to them.

Winifred walked silently ahead of Millicent right up to the church porch. As she entered it, a sudden bird flopped out just above her head and straight into Millicent's face.

"That's an owl," said Millicent. "We've woken him up."

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She almost expected Winifred to say that for owls it was the wrong time of day, or the wrong weather, or the close season; but Winifred was, in fact, simply staring at the wooden church door.

"Won't it open?" enquired Millicent.

"I don't really know. I can see no handle."

The awakened owl had begun to hoot mournfully, which Millicent fancied really was a little odd of it in the early afternoon.

Millicent in turn stared at the door.

"There's nothing at all."

"Not even a keyhole that we can look through," said Winifred.

"I suppose the church has simply been closed and boarded up."

"I'm not sure," said Winifred. "It looks like the original door to me. Old as old, wouldn't you say? Built like that. With no proper admittance offered."

Gazing at the door, Millicent could certainly see what Winifred meant. There were no church notices either, no local address of the Samaritans, no lists of ladies to do things.

"Let's see if we can peep in through a window," proposed Winifred.

"I shouldn't think we could. It's usually pretty difficult."

"That's because there are usually lookers-on to cramp one's style. We may find it easier here."

When they emerged from the porch, Millicent surmised that there were now two owls hooting, two at least. However, the once-bright day was losing its luster, becoming middle-aged and overcast.

"God, it's muggy," said Millicent.

"I expect there's rain on the way. You know we could do with it."

"Yes, but not here, not now."

Winifred was squeezing the tips of her shoes and her feet into places where the mortar had fallen out of the church wall, and sometimes even whole flints. She was adhering to ledges and small projections. She was forcing herself upwards in the attempt to look first through one window and then, upon failing and falling, through another. "I simply can't imagine what it can look like inside," she said.

They always did things thoroughly and properly, whatever the things were, but it was not a day in her life when Millicent felt like any kind of emulation. Moreover, she did not see how she could even give assistance to Winifred. They were no longer two schoolgirls, one able to hoist up the other as easily as Santa Claus' sack.

Unavailingly, Winifred had essayed two windows on the south side of the nave and one on the south side of the chancel, which

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three offered clear glass, however smudgy. In the two remaining windows on that side of the church, the glass was painted, and so it was with the east window. Winifred went round to the north side, with Millicent following. Here the sun did not fall, and it seemed to Millicent that the moping owls had eased off. En route the churchyard grasses had been rank and razory.

But here the masonry was further gone in decomposition, and Winifred could jump up quite readily at the first attempt.

For a surprisingly long time, or so it seemed, Winifred stared in through the easternmost window on the northern side of the nave, but speaking no word. Here many of the small panes were missing. Indeed, one pane fell into the church from somewhere with a small, sharp clatter even while Winifred was still gazing and Millicent still standing. The whole structure was in a state of molder.

At her own rather long last, Winifred descended stiffly.

She began trying to remove the aged, clinging rubble from the knees of her trousers, but the dust was damp too, on this side of the church particularly damp.

"Want to have a look?" Winifred asked.

"What is there to see?"

"Nothing in particular." Winifred was rubbing away, though almost certainly making matters worse. "Really, nothing. I shouldn't bother."

"Then I won't," said Millicent. "You look like a pilgrim: more on her knees than on her back, or whatever it is."

"Most of the things have been taken away," continued Winifred informatively.

"In that case, where did the funeral happen? Where did they hold the service?"

Winifred went on fiddling with her trousers for a moment before attempting a reply. "Somewhere else, I suppose. That's quite common nowadays."

"There's something wrong," said Millicent. "There's something very wrong with almost everything."

They ploughed back through the coarse grass to the brick path up to the porch. The owls seemed indeed to have retired once more to their carnivorous bothies.

"We must get on with things or we shall miss Baddeley," said Winifred. "Not that it hasn't all been well worth while, as I hope you will agree."

But—

On the path, straight before them, between the church porch and the other, by now almost familiar path which ran across the descending graveyard, right in the center of things, lay a glove.

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"That wasn't there either," said Millicent immediately.

Winifred picked up the glove and they inspected it together. It was a left-hand glove in black leather or kid, seemingly new or almost so, and really rather elegant. It would have been a remarkably small left hand that fitted it, Millicent thought. People occasionally remarked upon the smallness of her own hands, which was always something that pleased her. The tiny but expensive-looking body of the glove terminated in a wider gauntlet-like frill or extension of rougher design.

"We'd better hand it in," said Winifred.

"Where?"

"At the rectory, I suppose, if that is what the place is."

"Do you think we must?"

"Well, what else? We can't go off with it. It looks costly."

"There's someone else around the place," said Millicent. "Perhaps more than one of them." She could not quite have said why she thought there might be such a crowd.

But Winifred again remained silent and did not ask why.

"I'll carry the glove," said Millicent. Winifred was still bearing the rucksack and its remaining contents, including the empty half bottle, for which the graveyard offered no litter basket.

* * *

The carriage gate, which had once been painted in some kind of blue and was now falling apart, crossbar from socket, and spikework from woodwork, offered no clue as to whether the abode was, or had been, rectory or vicarage. The short drive was weedy and littered. Either the trees predated the mid-Victorian building, or they were prematurely senile.

The front-door bell rang quite sharply when Winifred pushed it, but nothing followed. After a longish, silent pause, with Millicent holding the glove to the fore, Winifred rang again. Again, nothing followed.

Millicent spoke: "I believe it's open."

She pushed and together they entered, merely a few steps. The hall within, which had originally been designed more or less in the Gothic manner, was furnished, though not abundantly, and seemed to be "lived in." Coming towards them, moreover, was a bent figure, female, hirsute, and wearing a discolored apron, depending vaguely.

"We found this in the churchyard," said Winifred in her clear voice, pointing to the glove.

"I can't hear the bell," said the figure. "That's why the door's left open. I lost my hearing. You know how."

Millicent knew that Winifred

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was no good with the deaf: so often a matter not of decibels, but presumably of psychology.

"We found this glove," she said, holding it up and speaking quite naturally.

"I can't hear anything," said the figure, disappointingly. "You know why."

"We don't," said Millicent. "Why?"

But of course that could not be heard either. It was no good trying further.

The retainer, if such she was, saved the situation. "I'll go for madam," she said and withdrew without inviting them to seat themselves on one of the haphazard sofas or uncertain-looking chairs.

"I suppose we shut the door," said Winifred, and did so.

They stood about for a little. There was nothing to look at apart from a single colored print of lambs in the Holy Land. At each corner of the frame, the fretwork made a cross, though one of the crosses had been partly broken off.

"None the less, I don't think it's still the rectory," said Winifred. "*Or* the vicarage."

"You're right." A middle-aged woman had appeared, wearing a loose dress. The color of the dress lay between oatmeal and cream, and round the oblong neck and the ends of the elbow-length sleeves ran wide strips of a cherry hue. The woman's shoes were faded, and she had taken little trouble with her bird's nest hair. "You're perfectly right," said the woman. "Hasn't been a clergyman here for years. There are some funny old rectories in this county, as you may have heard."

"Boreley, you mean," said Millicent, who had always been quite interested in such things.

"That place and a number of other places," said the woman. "Each little community has its specialty."

"This was a *rectory*," Winifred enquired in the way she often did, politely elevating her eyebrows, "not a vicarage?"

"They would have found it even more difficult to keep a vicar," said the woman in the most matter-of-fact way. Millicent could see there was no wedding ring on her hand. Indeed, there was no ring of any kind on either of her rather massive, rather unshaped hands. For that matter, there were no gems in her ears, no geegaws round her neck, no Castilian combs in her wild hair.

"Sit down," said the woman. "What can I do for you? My name's Stock. Pansy Stock. Ridiculous, isn't it? But it's a perfectly common name in Essex."

Winifred often went on in that very same way about "Essex," had indeed already done so more than

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once during the journey down, but Millicent had always supposed it to be one of Winifred's mild fancies, which it was up to her friends to indulge. She had never supposed it to have any objective metaphysic. Nor had she ever brought herself to address anyone as Pansy and was glad that the need was unlikely to arise now.

They sat, and because it seemed to be called for, Winifred introduced herself and then Millicent. Miss Stock sat upon the other sofa. She was wearing woolly, midgreen stockings.

"It's simply about this glove," went on Winifred. "We explained to your servant, but we couldn't quite make her understand."

"Lettice has heard nothing since it happened. That was the effect it had on her."

"Since *what* happened?" asked Winifred. "If we may ask, that is."

"Since she was jilted, of course," answered Miss Stock.

"That sounds very sad," said Winifred, in her affable and emollient way. Millicent, after all, had not exactly been jilted, not exactly. Technically, it was she who was the jilt. Socially, it still made a difference.

"It's the usual thing in this place. I've said that each community has its specialty. This is ours."

"How extraordinary!" said Winifred.

"It happens to all the females, and not only when they're still girls."

"I wonder they remain," responded Winifred smilingly.

"They don't remain. They come back."

"In what way?" asked Winifred.

"In what is known as spirit form," said Miss Stock.

Winifred considered. She was perfectly accustomed to claims of that kind, to the many sorts it takes to make a world.

"Like the Willis in *Giselle?*" she enquired helpfully.

"I believe so," said Miss Stock. "I've never been inside a theater. I was brought up not to go, and I've never seen any good reason for breaking the rule."

"It's become so expensive too," said Winifred, if only because it was what she would have said in other, doubtless more conventional circumstances.

"This glove," interrupted Millicent, actually dropping it on the floor because she had no wish to hold it any longer. "We saw it lying by itself on the churchyard path."

"I daresay you did," said Miss Stock. "It's not the only thing that's been seen lying in and around the churchyard."

Winifred politely picked up the glove, rose, and placed it on Miss Stock's sofa. "We thought we

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should hand it in locally."

"That's good of you," said Miss Stock. "Though no one will claim it. There's a room half full of things like it. Trinkets, knicknacks, great gold hearts the size of oysters, souvenirs of all kinds, even a pair of riding boots. Things seem to appear and disappear just as they please. No one ever enquires again for them. That's not why the females come back. Of course it was a kind action on your part. Sometimes people benefit, I suppose. They say that if one finds something, or sees something, one will come back anyway." Miss Stock paused for half a second. Then she asked casually, "Which of you was it?"

At once Millicent replied, "It was I who saw the glove first, and several other things too."

"Then you'd better take the greatest possible care," said Miss Stock, still quite lightly. "Avoid all entanglements of the heart, or you may end like Lettice."

Winifred, who was still on her feet, said, "Millicent, we really must go, or we shall *never* get to Baddeley End."

Miss Stock said at once, "Baddeley End is closed all day on Thursdays. So wherever else you go, there's no point in going *there*."

"You're right about Thursdays, Miss Stock," said Winifred, "because I looked it up most carefully in the book before we left. But this is Wednesday."

"It's not," said Millicent. "It's Thursday."

"Whatever else it may be," confirmed Miss Stock, "it indubitably is Thursday."

There was an embarrassing blank in time, while an angel flitted through the room, or perhaps a demon.

"I now realize that it is Thursday," said Winifred. She turned pale. "Millicent, I *am* sorry. I must be going mad."

"Of course there are many, many other places you can visit," said Miss Stock. "Endless places. Almost every little hamlet has something of its own to offer."

"Yes," said Winifred. "We must have a look round."

"What, then, *do* they come back for," asked Millicent, interrupting again, "if it's not for their property?"

"I didn't say it wasn't for their property. It depends *what* property. Not for their gloves or their rings or their little false thises and thats, but for their property, none the less. For what they *regard* as their property, anyway. One's broken heart, if it can be mended at all, can be mended only in one way."

"And yet at times," said Millicent, "the whole thing seems so trivial, so unreal. So absurd, even. Never really there at all. Utterly not

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worth the melodrama."

"Indubitably," said Miss Stock. "And the same is true of religious faith, or poetry, of a walk round a lake, of existence itself."

"I suppose so," said Millicent. "But personal feeling is quite particularly —" She could not find the word.

"Millicent," said Winifred. "Let's go." She seemed past conventions with their hostess. She looked white and upset. "We've got rid of the glove. Let's go."

"Tell me," said Millicent. "What *is* the one way to mend a broken heart? If we are to take the matter so seriously, we need to be told."

"Millicent," said Winifred, "I'll wait for you in the car. At the end of the drive, you remember."

"I'm flattered that you call it a drive," said Miss Stock.

Winifred opened the front door and walked out. The door flopped slowly back behind her.

"Tell me," said Millicent. "What is the one way to mend a broken heart?" She spoke as if in capital letters.

"You know what it is," said Miss Stock. "It is to kill the man who has broken it. Or at least to see to it that he dies."

"Yes, I imagined it was that," said Millicent. Her eyes were on the Palestinian lamblets.

"It is the sole possible test of whether the feeling is real," explained Miss Stock, as if she were a senior demonstrator.

"Or *was* real?"

"There can be no *was*, if the feeling's real."

Millicent withdrew her gaze from the gamboling livestock. "And have you yourself taken the necessary steps? If you don't mind my asking, of course?"

"No. The matter has never arisen in my case. I live here and I look on."

"It doesn't seem a very jolly place to live."

"It's a very instructive place to live. Very cautionary. I profit greatly."

Millicent again paused for a moment, staring across the sparsely endowed room at Miss Stock in her alarming clothes.

"What, Miss Stock, would be your final words of guidance?"

"The matter is probably out of your hands by now, let alone of mine."

Millicent could not bring herself to leave it at that.

"Do girls — women — come here from outside the village? If there really is a village? My friend and I haven't seen one and the church appears to be disused. It seems to have been disused for a very long time."

"Of course there's a village," said Miss Stock, quite fiercely.

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"And the church is not *entirely* disused, I assure you. And there are cows and a place where they are kept; and a river and a bridge. All the normal things, in fact, though, in each case, with a local emphasis, as is only right and proper. And, yes, females frequently come from outside the village. They find themselves here, often before they know it. Or so I take it to be."

Millicent rose.

"Thank you, Miss Stock, for bearing with us and for taking in our glove."

"Perhaps something of your own will be brought to me one day," remarked Miss Stock.

"Who knows?" replied Millicent, entering into the spirit, as she regularly tried to do.

Millicent detected a yellow collecting box on a broken table to the right of the front door. In large black letters a label proclaimed JOSEPHINE BUTLER AID FOR UNFORTUNATES. From her trousers pocket Millicent extracted a contribution. She was glad she did not have to grope ridiculously through a handbag while Miss Stock smiled and waited.

Miss Stock had risen to her feet but had not advanced to see Millicent out. She merely stood there, a little dimly.

"Good-by, Miss Stock."

In the front door, as with many rectories and vicarages, there were two large panes of glass, frosted overall but patterned *en clair* round the edge, so that in places one could narrowly see through to the outer world. About to pull the door open, which Winifred had left unlatched, Millicent apprehended the shape of a substantial entity standing noiselessly without. It was simply one thing too many. For a second time that day, Millicent found it difficult not to scream. But Miss Stock was in the mistiness behind her, and Millicent drew the door open.

"Nigel, my God!"

Millicent managed to pull fast the door behind her. Then his arms enveloped her, as ivy was enveloping the little church.

"I'm having nothing more to do with you. How did you know I was here?"

"Winifred told me, of course."

"I don't believe you. She's sitting in her car anyway, just by the gate. I'll ask her."

"She's not," said Nigel. "She's left."

"She can't have left. She was waiting for me. Please let me go, Nigel."

"I'll let you go, and then you can see for yourself."

They walked side by side in silence down the depressing, weedy drive. Millicent wondered whether Miss Stock was watching them through the narrow, distorting

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streaks of machine-cut glass.

There was no Winifred and no car. Thick brown leaves were strewn over the place where the car had stood. It seemed to Millicent for a moment as if the car had been buried there.

"Never mind, my dear. If you behave yourself, I'll drive you home."

"I can't see your car either." It was a notably inadequate rejoinder, but at least spontaneous.

"Naturally not. It's hidden."

"Why is it hidden?"

"Because I don't want you careering off in it and leaving me behind. You've tried to ditch me once, and once is enough for any human being."

"I didn't *try* to ditch you, Nigel. I completed the job. You were smashing up my entire life."

"Not your life, sweet. Only your idiot career, so-called."

"*Not* only."

"Albeit, I shan't leave you to walk home."

"Not home. Only to the station. I know precisely where it is. Winifred pointed it out. She saw it on the map. She said there are still trains."

"You really can't rely on Winifred."

Millicent knew that this was a lie. Whatever had happened to Winifred, Nigel was lying. Almost everything he said was a lie, more or less. Years ago it had been among the criteria by which she had realized how deeply and truly she loved him.

"You can't always rely on maps either," said Nigel.

"What's happened to Winifred?" How absurd and schoolgirlish she always seemed in her own eyes when trying to reach anything like equal terms with Nigel! The silly words leapt to her lips without her choosing or willing them.

"She's gone. Let's do a little sightseeing before we drive home. You can tell me about the crockets and finials. It will help to calm us down."

Again he put his arm tightly round her and, despite her half-simulated resistance, pushed and pulled her through the kissing gate into the churchyard. Her resistance was half-simulated because she knew from experience how useless with Nigel was anything more. He knew all the tricks by which at school big boys pinion and compel small ones, and he had never hesitated to use them against Millicent, normally, of course, upon a more or less agreed basis of high spirits, good fun, and knowing better than she what it would be sensible for them to do next. His frequent use of real and serious physical force had been another thing that had attracted her.

He dragged her down the unev-

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en path. "Beautiful place. Peaceful. Silent as the grave."

And, indeed, it *was* quiet now, singularly different in small ways from when Millicent had been there with Winifred. Not only the owls but all the hedgerow birds had ceased to utter. One could not even detect an approaching aircraft. The breeze had dropped, and all the long grass looked dead or painted.

"Tell me about the architecture," said Nigel. "Tell me what to look at."

"The church is shut," said Millicent. "It's been closed for years."

"Then it shouldn't be," said Nigel. "Churches aren't meant to be shut. We'll have to see."

He propelled her up the path where earlier she had first seen the glove. The hand that belonged to it must be very nearly the hand of a child: Millicent realized that now.

In the porch, Nigel sat her down upon the single battered wooden bench, perhaps at one time borrowed from the local school, when there had been a local school. "Don't move, or I'll catch you one. I'm not having you leave me again, yet a while."

Nigel set about examining the church door, but really there was little to examine. The situation could be taken in very nearly at a glance and a push.

Nigel took a couple of steps back and massed himself sideways. Wasting no time, he had decided to charge the door, to break it down. Quite possibly it was already rickety, despite appearances.

But that time Millicent really did scream.

"No!"

The noise she had made seemed all the shriller when bursting upon the remarkable quietness that surrounded them. She could almost certainly have been heard in the erstwhile rectory, even though not by poor Lettice. Millicent had quite surprised herself. She was an unpracticed screamer.

She had even deflected Nigel for a moment.

She expostulated further. "Don't! Please don't!"

"Why not, chicken?" Almost beyond doubt, his surprise was largely real.

"If you want to, climb up outside and look in through the window, first." The volume and quality of her scream had given her a momentary ascendancy over him. "The other side of the church is easier."

He was staring at her. "All right. If you say so."

They went outside without his even holding on to her.

"No need to go round to the back," said Nigel. "I can manage perfectly well here. So can you, for that matter. Let's jump up together."

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"No," said Millicent.

"Please yourself," said Nigel. "I suppose you've seen the bogey already. Or is it the black mass?" He was up in a single spring and adhering to nothing visible, like an ape. His head was sunk between his shoulders as he peered, so that his red curls made him resemble a larger Quasimodo, who, Millicent recollected, was always clinging to Gothic walls and descrying.

Nigel flopped down in silence. "I see what you mean," he said upon landing. "Not in the least a sight for sore eyes. Not a sight for little girls at all. Or even for big ones." He paused for a moment, while Millicent omitted to look at him. "All right. What else is there? Show me. Where do we go next?"

He propelled her back to the path across the churchyard and they began to descend towards the river.

It was, therefore, only another moment or two before Millicent realized that the pile of wreaths was no longer there: no sprays, no harps, no hearts, no angelic trumpets; only a handful of field flowers bound with common string. For a moment, Millicent merely doubted her eyes yet again, though not only her eyes.

"Don't think they use this place any longer," said Nigel. "Seems full up to me. That would explain whatever it is that's been going on in the church. What happens if we go through that gate?"

"There's a big meadow with cows in it and then a sort of passage down to the river."

"*What* sort of passage?"

"It runs between briars, and it's muddy."

"We don't mind a little mud, do we, rooster? What's the river called, anyway?"

"Winifred says it's called the Waste."

"Appropriate," said Nigel. "Though not any more, I hasten to add, not any more."

It was exactly as he said it that Millicent noticed the headstone. "Nigel Alsopp Ormathwaite Ticknor. Strong, Patient, and True. Called to Higher Service." And a date. No date of birth: only the one date. That day's date.

The day that she had known to be a Thursday when Winifred had not.

The stone was in grey granite, or perhaps near granite. The section of it bearing the inscription had been planed and polished. When she had been here last, Millicent had been noticing little, and on the return from the picnic the inscription would not have confronted her in any case, as was shown by its confronting her now.

"Not any more," said Nigel a third time. "Let's make it up yet again, henny."

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At least, Millicent stopped. She was staring at the inscription. Nigel's hands and arms were in no way upon or around her or particularly near her.

"I love you, chickpeas," said Nigel. "That's the trouble, isn't it? We got on better when I didn't."

Seldom had Nigel been so clear-sighted. It was eerie. Still, the time of which he spoke was another thing that had been long, long ago.

"I don't know what to say," said Millicent. What other words were possible? No longer were they children, or young people, or anything at all like that.

They went forward a few paces, so that the headstone now stood behind Millicent. She did not turn to see whether there were words upon the back of it.

Nigel went through the second kissing gate ahead of her. "Don't you bother," he said. "I expect you've been down to the river with Winifred. I know you won't run away now. I'll just take a quick peek at the fishing."

However, there seemed by now no point in not following him, and Millicent pushed back the gate in her turn.

"Please yourself," said Nigel.

But Millicent had become aware of a development. The animals formerly in the far and upper corner were now racing across the open space towards Nigel and her, and so silently that Nigel had not so much as noticed them: "cows," she had described them, when speaking of them to Winifred; "stock," as her stepfather might have termed them. There is always an element of the absurd about British domestic animals behaving as if they were in the Wild West. Still, this time it was an element that might be overlooked.

"Nigel!" exclaimed Millicent, and drew back through the gate, which clanged away from her.

"Nigel!!"

He went sturdily on. We really should not be frightened of domestic animals in fields. Moreover, so quiet were these particular fields that Nigel still seemed unaware of anything moving other than himself.

"Nigel!!!"

The animals were upon him and leaving little doubt of their intentions, in so far as the last word was applicable. In no time, on the grass and on the hides, there was blood, and worse than blood. Before long, there was completely silent, but visibly most rampageous trampling. Tails were raised now, and eyes untypically stark. But the mob of beasts, by its mere mass, probably concealed the worst from Millicent.

Seek help. That is what one is called upon to do in these cases. At the least, call for help. Millicent, recently so vocal, found that she

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could make no noise. The grand quietness had taken her in as well.

"Oh, Nigel, love."

But soon the animals were merely nuzzling around interestedly. It was as if they had played no part in the consummation towards which they were sniffing and over which they were slobbering.

Millicent clung to the iron gate. Never before that day had she screamed. Never yet in her life had she fainted.

Then she became aware that the churchyard had somehow filled with women, or, at least, that women were dotted here and there among the mounds and memorials, sometimes in twos, threes, and fours, though more commonly as single spies.

These women were not like the Willis in Winifred's favorite ballet. They were bleak and commonplace and often not young at all. Millicent could not feel herself drawn to them. But she realized that they were not merely in the churchyard but in the meadow too, from which the tempestuous cattle seemed to have withdrawn while for a second her back had been turned. In fact, at that moment the women were just about everywhere.

Absurd, absurd. Even now, Millicent could not overlook that element. The whole business simply could not be worth all this, and, in the world around her, everyone knew that it was not. Sometimes one suffered acutely, yes, but not even the suffering was ever quite real, let alone the events and experience supposedly suffered over. Life was not entirely, or even mainly, a matter of walking round a lake, if one might adopt Miss Stock's persuasive analogy.

None the less, it must have been more or less at this point that Millicent somehow lost consciousness.

Winifred was looking from above into her face. Winifred was no longer pale, but nearly her usual color, and renewed in confidence.

"My dear Millicent, I should have put you to bed instead of taking you out into the country! How on earth did you come to fall asleep?"

"Where are the cows?"

Winifred looked through the ironwork of the gate into the field behind her. "Not there, as far as I can see. I expect they've gone to be milked."

"They're not really cows at all, Winifred. Not ordinary cows."

"My dear girl!" Winifred looked at her hard, then seemed more seriously concerned. "Have you been attacked? Or frightened?"

"Not *me*," said Millicent.

"Then who?"

Millicent gulped and drew herself together.

"It was a dream. Merely a

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dream. I'd rather not talk about it."

"Poor sweet, you must be worn out. But how did you get down here? Have you been sleepwalking?"

"I was taken. That was part of the dream."

"It was shocking, that Stock woman going on as she did. You should have closed your ears."

"And eyes," said Millicent.

"I expect so," said Winifred, smiling. "It was a hideous place. If you're fully awake now, I expect you'd like to go? I've made a mess of the whole day."

"I couldn't see the car. I was looking for it."

"I moved it. I wanted to be out of sight. You couldn't have supposed I'd driven it through the churchyard."

"Anything seems possible," said Millicent, as they walked up the slope. "Anything. For example, you saw all those flowers. You saw them with your own eyes. Where are they?"

"They've been taken off to some hospital. It's what people do after funerals nowadays."

"And the mushrooms down by the river?"

"They were there from the first, as I told you."

"And Miss Stock's stories?"

"She just needs a man. Oh, I'm sorry, Millicent."

"And the inside of the church?"

"That was really rather nasty. I'm not going to talk about it, I'm not even going to think about it, and I'm certainly not going to let you look at it."

"Oughtn't whatever it is to be reported somewhere?"

"Not by me," said Winifred with finality.

As they had passed for the last time through the gate leading out of the churchyard, Winifred had said, "We're going home as quickly as possible. I'm taking you to my place, and I'm putting you to bed with a sedative. I don't really know about this kind of trouble, but I've seen what I've seen, and what you need in the first place is a good, long sleep, I'm sure of it."

Millicent herself knew that grief, especially repressed grief, was said to induce second sight, let alone second thoughts.

None the less, Millicent woke up at just before half past eleven. Long ago, in the early days with Nigel, one of them had each night telephoned the other at that time, and often they had conversed until midnight, when it had been agreed that the closure be applied. Such simplicities had come to an end years and years before, but on no evening since she had given up Nigel had Millicent gone to bed before that particular hour.

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There was little chance of Nigel even remembering the old, sentimental arrangement and less chance of his now having anything easeful to say to her. Still, Millicent, having looked at her watch, lay there sedated and addled, but awake; and duly the telephone rang.

An extension led to the bedside in Winifred's cozy spare room. Winifred herself could not relax in a room without a telephone.

Millicent had the receiver in her hand at the first half-ping of the delicate little bell.

"Hullo," said Millicent softly to the darkness. Winifred had drawn all the curtains quite tight, since that was the way Winifred liked her own room at night.

"Hullo," said Millicent softly, a second time. At least it could hardly now be a call for Winifred. It was all the more important not to waken her.

On the line, or at the other end of it, something seemed to stir. There could be little doubt of it. It was not a mere reflex of the mechanism.

"Hullo," repeated Millicent softly.

Third time lucky, because at last there was a reply.

"Hullo, feathers," said Nigel.

In all the circumstances, Millicent could not possibly just ring off, as rationally she should have done.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"What a sight you look in Winifred's nightwear. Not your style at all, crop."

Every inch of Millicent's flesh started simultaneously to fall inwards. "Nigel! Where are you?"

"I'm right outside your door, gizzard. Better come at once. But do wear your own pajamas. The scarlet ones. The proper ones."

"I'm not coming, Nigel. I've told you that. I mean it."

"I'm sure you mean it since you left me to be trodden upon by a lot of bloody heifers without doing one thing except grin. It makes no difference. Less difference than ever, in fact. I want you and I'm waiting outside your door now."

She simply couldn't speak. What could she possibly say?

"You come to me, three toes," said Nigel, "*and* wearing your own clothes. Or, make no mistake, I'm coming to you."

The receiver fell from Millicent's hand. It crashed to the bedroom floor, but the carpet in Winifred's guest bedroom was substantial, and Winifred heard nothing. In any case, Winifred herself had just passed a trying day also and needed her rest before the demands of life on the morrow, the renewed call of the wild.

A group of concerned friends, male and female, clustered round

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Winifred after the inquest, for which a surprising number had taken time off.

"I have never been in love," said Winifred. "I really don't understand about it."

People had to accept that and get on with things, routine and otherwise. What else could they do?

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This is the first published fiction of John Kessel, who writes that he "started out wanting to be an astrophysicist, but got waylaid by tensor calculus and, simultaneously, seduced by Herman Melville. I hold a BA in Physics and English from the University of Rochester and an M.A. in English from the University of Kansas, where I've taught composition and science fiction. I am 6'5" tall, 27 years old and married to the only Penelope it has been my pleasure to meet."

Just Like A Cretin Dog

by JOHN KESSEL

Vincent Castle let go of the welder, which drifted off to the length of its tether behind him, and ran his gloved thumb along the seam which he'd just completed. "Go ahead, sublimate," he said; "*That* weld won't boil away."

"Is that a bet?" Simon Arglos' voice scratched dryly in his headphones.

Castle kicked his boot free of the colony skin and fell back to the limit of his own safety strap. He watched Arglos cling crablike to the hull.

"You make it one and you lose," he said confidently. "How much?"

Arglos' helmet tipped toward him. The glass was opaqued and Castle couldn't see his face. "No thanks," the answer came.

Castle grinned. "Okay, Sime. You know how it is. Why don't you go get us two more number-nine strips."

"Sure."

Castle watched him gingerly move off over the curve of the hull toward the port they'd come out of a hundred meters away. Reeling in his inertial lifeline as he went, Simon looked more crablike than ever. He hadn't been up long enough to get comfortable working in the vacuum, light-years above the arena and no net. Vince watched until the figure disappeared below the metal horizon, then swiveled in the harness to face outward from the enormous cylinder. He always took every opportunity to look at the stars when he had to work outside.

The welding harness now pushed in at his chest and belly with the force of a half-g; he let his limbs hang and wondered, as he always did, at the slow parade of the universe around him. Here he was — here *they* were — at the center. Ten thousand stars, clear points of

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multicolored brilliance, drifted from above his left shoulder, across the broad field of his vision, past the tip of his right boot. Looking past his feet and behind, he could see the unfinished skeleton of the south end of the colony, a kilometer distant, awaiting the addition of its metal skin to make it complete. The whole damn thing rotating once every fifty seconds, with Vincent Castle hanging by some threads like a tiny spider on the side of a milk bottle.

The light illuminating his body flicked out as though a switch had been thrown; he was on the nightside of Lagrange I.

Somewhere out there they live, he thought, creatures like or unlike us, and they look out at the stars just as we do, and they have been here to meet us. Castle looked like plodding competence itself, but the curious fact was that his woolly speculations on alien life had driven him quite insane. The other riggers had kidded him unmercifully at first, until the joke had long since gone stale. And he had never even hinted at the wildest of his ideas. He never told them what he saw. He knew better now. It was a private matter between himself and those stars.

There was a vibration and a whirring in the tight confines of his suit, then a slight snap at his right beltside. When he turned his helmet lamp on it, he saw that his lifeline had somehow come unhooked and had reeled itself into his belt. He was now hooked only by the welding harness. Alarmed, he began to swivel back, but before he could turn came a blow to his helmet that rattled his head like a peach pit in a jar. The top half of his body pitched outward, and as he went head over heels, the pressure of the straps on his chest suddenly, shockingly ceased. His heart leapt to his throat and he cried out — but there was no answering echo in his headphones. The sickness in his gut was weightlessness and despair. He was cut loose. He was in free fall.

The cylinder of Lagrange I that had seemed as mammoth as a world was a quantum smaller each time his tumbling motion brought it into view. Radio busted, gasping, staring in dizzy incomprehension for a glimpse of the inhuman thing that had killed him, Vincent Castle fell away at 38.34 meters per second, drawing a long newtonian tangent toward the Perseus arm of the galaxy.

A city in space. A huge cylindrical city a kilometer and a half long, each half rotating independently, joined by a central hub of zero gravity. Forty-five concentric shells. Great mechanized factories producing more than the essentials

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of life. Whole parklands, forests, lakes and hills contained within the confines of its levels. Fifty thousand inhabitants: skilled workers, clever scientists, daring artists, philosophers, dedicated scholars, athletes. All of them at home in the new world. Participatory democracy. A clean enviroment, clean because minutely regulated and totally self-contained. A harmonious new world, a balance of freedom and responsibility. Time for work, time for play, time for ambition, time for love.

Atlas lived here. He had never been happier. He had only to reach out and touch its richness.

He woke up.

"113 workdays in this unit without a major accident," the red sign above the exit of the riggers' wardroom said. "Let's keep that number climbing."

113 days without an accident, Atlas Cuthberton thought, and forty days behind schedule. He stepped into the room, and a couple of off-shift riggers gave him the cold once-over.

"Have you guys seen Battaglia? I need to talk to him."

The men turned their attention to their game of chess, as if it didn't matter that Cuthberton was nominally their boss. He didn't carry a union card.

"He went up to Level 15 com," one of them finally said.

Atlas headed for the nearest elevator. He suspected the men of racism, but he couldn't make anything of it. Cuthberton was by nature a nervous man, given to brooding about both his own actions and the way he was treated by others. He tried not to let it show, for he had learned through sad experience that a person in authority, though he could and sometimes should get angry, should never fall prey to moods. It was a sign of weakness that even the dullest of men under you could spot.

That they should resent him because he was black infuriated him, and not just because of the obvious stupid ignorance of it. There was that other reason, the fetid secret that rotted down there in the swampy lower level of his thoughts. His father must have wanted him to be a pro football player, giving him that name. At cornerback, number twenty-three, Atlas Cuthberton. Six three, one ninety. Black Atlas.

He knew that one of the reasons the Space Agency had made him Project Coordinator was because he was black. It was a cynical reality that ate at him, even though he knew he was a good man, the best for the job. The inverted racism of the administrators who'd hired him was obvious. So

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what if he's competent or not, as long as he doesn't screw up too badly. Think of the PR.

He was indeed falling into one of his moods. He jerked his mind back from the edge of that pit and turned to the problem at hand, as the elevator pulled him up twelve levels toward the axis of Lagrange I. he could feel the slight reduction in weight as he rose; even at the rim the acceleration was only a half-g. It would be another three months before they'd be ready to increase the spin of this half of the colony to full gravity.

Level 15 was a tech level. A couple of electronics women in gray coveralls passed in the corridor that curved upward more sharply here than on the down levels. He wondered what business Battaglia, the riggers' union steward, had in a communications center. The union was what Atlas needed to talk to him about. Sarah Hirsch, the head designer, had some complaints to make about the way the riggers were placing the radial struts at the uncompleted south end of the colony. She was getting on Atlas' back about it, when she wasn't on his belly at night.

Then there was the continual hassle between the riggers and the environmental engineers. The E-engineers were a different union, and in theory their work was independent of the riggers, since most of the systems they worked on could not be properly set up until the preliminary construction was completed. In theory. In practice much of the rigger's work had a direct bearing on the E-crew's. Yet because of the goddamned unions, a rigger, though he might know a lot about environment, could not do any work classified under the Universal Space Regulations as "environmental," and likewise, an E-engineer could not do any "construction." So jobs that could have been finished quickly and efficiently by one crew had to wait around for the other to come in and do a single weld, align a single duct. And the E-engineers and riggers were always at each others' throats.

Atlas Cuthberton, the forsaken bastard, was caught in the middle. The highly-visible-to-his-superiors middle.

He reached the com room, thumbed the touchplate, and the door slid aside. In the subdued light of the long room, men and women sat at the long consoles before blue screens, or lounged in the aisles in padded chairs. He spotted Joe Battaglia huddled with a group of technicians over one of the main display screens. Standing among them was a young rigger who was still wearing his spacesuit, though the helmet was removed. The men

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were talking in low, energetic voices, as if they were excited but did not want their conversation to be overheard. They all shut up when they saw Atlas coming.

Battaglia came forward to meet him. He was three or four inches shorter than Cuthberton, wiry, curly black hair thinning on top.

"Listen, we've got trouble," he said before Atlas could speak.

Atlas ignored Joe and stared at the spaceman, who cringed slightly. He'd expected trouble, seeing a rigger on the com level.

"What's the problem?"

Battaglia tiredly rubbed the back of his neck. "One of our men, a guy named Castle: we think he's lost."

Atlas felt a twinge from what he suspected was an incipient ulcer. He grabbed Battaglia by the arm and pulled him aside.

"Lost! What do you mean, lost?"

"He was resealing some of those bad seams between number eight and nine ports. Arglos, the kid there, was with him and came in for some more steel. When he got back, Castle was gone. All that was left was the welder hanging by its tether."

Jesus, no, Atlas thought. This isn't happening to me.

"Well, what about the radar? Didn't they track him? No distress call?"

Battaglia, curiously, almost sneered at him. "That's what we're up here trying to find out. They claim they didn't see anything. I think they must have been screwing around, not paying attention."

It was possible. Christ knew there were enough time-wasters around already, and it would only take a few minutes for the guy to pass out of the close-range radar. Once he hit the long-range, they might take him for anything — if they'd ever monitored it.

He walked over to the small group at the console. "Who was on duty here?"

A small woman with the standard cropped hair spoke up. "Addison and I were."

"You're Newby, aren't you?" He remembered her from when she'd come up a month before. He'd told himself that in other circumstances he'd like to take her for a ride. He looked at Addison, who stared levelly at him, and knew that a little unscheduled activity was probably the cause of the problem.

"Can you tell me when you stopped scanning and how long you were away?"

She surprised him by telling him, directly, with no fuss. Thank God for small honesties. Atlas ordered a full scan on long-range and called the hangar to have a

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scout ready to go in case they spotted something. He knew they didn't have a chance. He ordered Addison and Newby to their quarters, sent the dazed Arglos away, then turned to Battaglia.

"Joe, I want to know why I wasn't told about this the minute it happened. I want to know why Arglos came to you first — we've had too much of this crap going on already, and it's beginning to stink."

Joe nodded earnestly at him, and Atlas wondered again whether Battaglia might not in reality be a Jew. He had that certain serious competitiveness about him. Not an Italian characteristic.

Not that Atlas was by any means a racist. He knew the asininity of racism from bitter experience. But it troubled him to think his friend might be putting on a masquerade for some unknown, desperate, reason. People weren't always what they seemed.

As they were about to leave, the man at the terminal of the main computer called them.

"Mr. Cuthberton? Look at this."

Atlas went over; Joe followed. On the blue screen of the terminal glowed the words:

VINCENT THOMAS CASTLE
EXTERMINATED.
JUST LIKE A CRETIN DOG.
/EOJ

***

Atlas rested his head in his hands and slumped over the desk in his office on Level 35.

Collier at the Project Center back in Santa Rosa had given him hell without overtly criticizing him. "How had Castle been lost? The details? Will you write a covering letter to the next-of-kin? You'll need to bring the project back on schedule. In any construction of this magnitude, mishaps will occur. It's a wonder that your operational record had been so good up to this point. We're still ahead of Brazil. Make a statement for the press and we'll handle it from here." The reassurances had not been reassuring. But at least he could concentrate on the work at hand and leave the hassles with the Conservationists on Earth to the PR experts.

He hadn't told Collier about the computer message.

How could he think about living with Sarah after this? Why the hell had he slept with her in the first place?

He knew at least that answer. He'd wanted to get ahead. She was the head designer. Lagrange I was her child, and if he wanted to rise in the organization, one good way was to get on good terms with Sarah Hirsch, goddess of space, wired from coast to coast, darling of the people and the Congress.

Atlas had liked her at first

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because she was different from other women he knew. She didn't have any sexual illusions about big black men. She had a quirky personality: she was not aggressive, but she was calmly able to get things done. You got the impression she knew what she wanted and calmly sorted out her desires into neat rational lists — without becoming some kind of robot. She liked men, she liked women. She had a head on her shoulders. If something was bothering you, you could tell her without being afraid she would fly off the handle. In bed, she would close her eyes and concentrate totally on the matter in hand. In everything she had the quality of being exceptional while all her individual actions did not in themselves seem anything other than normal.

Atlas had even come close to telling Sarah that swampy secret — the one he wouldn't let on to anyone, not even Joe in the most intimate of confessional moods. His secret. That he wasn't really a black man, that his parents had been Italian. That they had had his genes illegally engineered by a Mafiosa dotore in Palermo, before the zygote had been implanted in his mother's womb. That the closest his progenitors had come to Africa was on a boat ride from Sicily. That his father's real name had been Cutalini.

He rested his head in his hands and slumped over the desk in his office on Level 35.

Every morning (even though there was no day or night, he persisted in calling the beginning of his waking period "morning"), Simon Arglos got up early and ran one circuit of the corridor that looped around the colony on the outermost level. Since the radius of the cylinder was about 300 meters, in this way he got almost two kilometers of running and kept in shape. Some of the other riggers thought he was crazy.

Simon wasn't crazy, but he *was* an idealist. He had been born and raised in Pocatello, Idaho, his father a retired professor of English literature and a devout Catholic who saw no use for space travel. Though Simon considered that he had broken with his family by forsaking Catholicism and taking engineering in college, in fact, the same habit of mind that had made his father such a sternly religious man, had evidenced itself in Simon's devotion to the idea of man's apotheosis through his conquest of space. He would have been embarrassed to have to put this belief in words. Nevertheless, he felt that space exploration offered man the opportunity to make a new start, free of the mistakes that had made the earth such an

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unpleasant place to live. With a good will, humanity could not help but improve its lot in the universe.

It was therefore not surprising that, as he jogged along the white corridor, past men and women at work, some riggers in spacesuits nearing the end of their shifts, Simon's thoughts were wrapped up in the tragedy of Vince Castle's death. Though there was nothing he could have done to prevent the accident, he could not help feeling a little guilty. It had been so sudden and senseless. he was surprised that an experienced man like Vince, whom he had admired for his competence, could have made such a fatal mistake. Space was a cruel environment. Cruel, but fair.

His feet thodded regularly along the corridor, and he drew deep breaths in rhythm to his stride. Now and then he would pass an open doorway through which he saw people turn to stare at him. They shot him the same quizzical look that Coordinator Cuthberton had given him the day before in the com room. Cuthberton's stern brown eyes and curly black beard made him look like one of the Magi in the picture of the Nativity that had hung over the dining room table back home. The hint of accusation in those eyes had hurt Simon, for Atlas Cuthberton had been one of his heroes from the time Simon had read about his rescue of the three trapped congressmen in the hub of the Jamaica Synchronous Satellite. Simon had almost said aloud, "I'm sorry." It was good that he hadn't. A man like Cuthberton wouldn't appreciate him crying over something that they had no control over. Someday maybe he would be as...

Arglos' thoughts were interrupted by a muffled thump and a slight vibration that simultaneously ran through the deck. He stopped running. The sound must have come from behind the double doors a few steps back on his right. He went back and, curious, leaned his head against them. There was no sound. The doors were to an elevator shaft that ran from the center, top level, to the outmost one, number 45, that he was on now. A stenciled sign on the doors said "Construction incomplete. Use shaft #3." The touchplate at its side was not working. Could he have imagined the sound, what with his running? Or maybe somebody dropped something down the shaft?

A lady in an E-tech's coveralls came down the hall, and Simon quenched his curiosity and continued running. One damn thing after another. The woman was not particularly good-looking, but she set him to thinking about sex. He had wondered for some time now

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what it would be like to make love in zero gravity. Some of the other riggers talked about it, but Simon knew that most of their talk was idle boasting. It was crude and empty as well. Simon's inclinations ran in a more romantic vein. His idea of the ideal woman was the remarkable Sarah Hirsch, dark and intelligent, in her quiet way even more impressive than Cuthberton.

Simon thought he was falling in love with her.

To Muhammed Little, space travel was a crock. Not only was it a crock: it was a white Christian crock. Wasn't the Houston Space Center just crawling with "born again" Fellowship of Christian Astronauts ex-Air Force morons? Didn't the President himself resurrect that decrepit old Billy Garage to lay his blessing on the Space Colony program when he'd gone on the Stee-V? When Herbert Aziz had left the month before after his first hitch was up on Lagrange I, he'd come over to the E-engineers' lounge and told Muhammed, "A *black* Muslim wouldn't work up here. Not a real Muslim."

Muhammed had thought about it a lot: he was going to quit after this hitch was up. He didn't sign on to be a soldier, and he didn't hold with being treated like one. He'd looked up to that Atlas Cuthberton because he was a brother, even if they said he was an atheist, but now he was disillusioned. He didn't see the boss standing up for him when he had to work double shifts. The damn *union* didn't even stand up to the administration. They were too busy fighting with the riggers. Meanwhile, whenever there was shitwork to be done, they gave Muhammed the shovel.

That was why, after he finished the alignment job in Level 10 hydroponics, he headed up to the center shaft to find a place to punt the last hour of his shift. Take a nap in low-g. What could they do? Dock his pay? — He was satisfied already. Maybe they'd even come straight with him if he put on a little pressure.

There were few people in the huge axial chamber that ran the length of this end of the colony, when Muhammed got out of the number-three elevator. Those who were there were in the electric carts moving in some giant piece of machinery from the zero-g hub. They must have been four hundred meters away. The gravity was only a fraction of a g here; up to his left around the curve of the cylinder he saw the superstructure of an uncompleted elevator shaft. As good a place as any.

He circled around the powerless doors with their "Construction Incomplete" sign, found the

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ladder set into the side of the structure, quickly climbed to the level of the winch room and through the service door. He didn't think anyone had seen him. The room was dark, filled with machinery that smelled of oil. He found the light, stretched out in the space near the closed trapdoor to the shaft, and soon was dozing.

It did not seem like much later that he was at the same moment weakened and sent into a dizzying fog of pain by something striking him in the head. He fumbled to his knees, eyes bleary, was knocked forward by a kick to his ribs, and felt himself falling into a pit of darkness. It was some moments before he realized that this was not unconsciousness. He *was* falling. Someone had pushed him into the elevator shaft.

Panic surged in Muhammed's chest, driving away the pain. But he wasn't dead yet. Though he was tumbling ass over teacup down the shaft, he could see in faint light from the open door above that the walls were moving upward much more slowly than they ought to. The acceleration was too small near the center of Lagrange! It increased second by second as he fell outward, but as yet his velocity was small enough that he might save himself! He spread his arms and legs to slow the tumbling, saw the rungs of the service ladder set in the wall of the shaft. He couldn't reach it. He drew his legs up against his chest; the spinning increased, and he fumbled with the laces of his boot. He'd not have time for more than one try. He wished the holy shoe were more massive. Waiting for exactly the right moment, twisting his body so that it was aligned properly, he threw the boot as hard as he could at the wall directly opposite the ladder. The rungs were flying by faster now, as he drifted with maddening slowness toward them, his left arm stretched until his muscles trembled, still spinning dizzily down the shaft.

He was falling too fast now, he'd never make it — yes, he would! His knuckles brushed one of the rungs, and he twisted in the growing darkness; lunging desperately, he grabbed the metal rod in his left hand. His body swung downward like a whip as he tried to reach with his right hand as well. He didn't make it. The point of his left hip slammed against the wall with an agonizing jolt; his elbow cracked against the rung below the one he held, and the metal slipped from his grasp. Sobbing with fear, Muhammed Little spun down the shaft. He hit the bottom with the unresonant sound of a sack of potatoes dumped on a loading dock.

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Joe Battaglia was amazed at the risk Cuthberton was taking.

"You didn't tell Collier about the message that came over the computer?"

"No."

"Why the hell not? Someone had to feed that message into it. Whoever did that must have had something to do with what happened to Castle. That makes it murder."

Cuthberton swiveled in his chair to look out the port behind his desk; his office, at the extreme north end of Lagrange I, was one of the few to have a window. The earth, 384,000 kilometers away, circled slowly with the starfield as the colony rotated. Joe admired the black man's coolness.

Without looking at him, Atlas finally answered. "You're probably right — thought you know we can't be absolutely sure. There's a chance some halfwit thought it would be funny to code in that sentence the minute he found out Castle was missing. 'Just like a cretin dog.' It's just the kind of thing someone who's been up here too long might do on the crazy spur of the moment."

Joe thought that was one of the unlikeliest stories he'd ever heard, but he'd play along for the time being.

"How many people knew about Castle?"

"You would know *that*," Atlas said sarcastically. "Seems I was the last to find out. Unless you or Arglos talked, only the people who were there in the com room should know. I'm going to ask them some questions, and maybe they'll speak up."

Battaglia laughed to himself. If that was really Atlas's idea of a good plan, then he should have been a cornerback on a football team. Joe kind of liked Cuthberton, though he had not yet been able to pin down what made him tick. Joe considered himself a student of character. You had to be, if you were going to get anywhere as a union steward, caught between the employer and the rank and file. His training in psychology had helped him to shape people's behavior without their being aware of it. It gave him a distinct advantage. But at times like this he would suddenly forget about stimulus-response and begin wondering against all reason what was going on inside a man like Atlas. He hated mysteries. He wanted to cut through the fog.

So Joe fell out of the role he'd set for himself.

"Look, Atlas," he said. "You know that's damned unlikely. I think this is a conspiracy. The Conservationists have been getting bolder all the time, what with that brownout in the Northwest and the

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compromising deal we had to make with Brazil. They hate us up here. They hate the idea of us. They want to shut us down, and a little sabotage wouldn't bother them at all. We need a formal investigation."

Atlas turned toward him, placed the palms of his hands flat on the desk, and leaned forward.

"Just what do you think some clumsy SBI crew would find out, little man? They gonna find a manifesto in somebody's foot locker, an Earth First button on their coveralls? They gonna find nothing!" Cuthberton slapped the desk explosively and got up so furiously that his feet came off the floor, and it took him an absurd second to float back down.

"This thing is for *damn* sure a conspiracy, and *you* know what I mean!"

Battaglia hadn't the slightest idea what he meant.

"You know who gets hung for paranoia if I come whimpering to Collier! The black man, that's who! And don't think I don't know that you think the union imagines that I don't know what to think about all this. Well, think again. And tell your friends, the E-engineers, to take off their dunce caps. I've suspected that milk-white Arglos character from the moment I saw him, just like that wonky Castle and his aliens before him. Now that we've got our cards on the table," he stood again facing the earth, hanging like a swollen concord grape in space, "I can tell you that I want you to keep an eye on this Arglos."

His tone changed abruptly from anger to good humor. "I'm your friend, Joe. You don't have to hide anything from me. I know you're trying to pass — just watch this Arglos, and remember that all the time I'm watching you. Then we'll catch these bastards and get back to work. Got me?"

Joe stood up. "I got you, Atlas."

He left the office of the Project Coordinator with a new realization of Cuthberton's depth. The transparent pretense of incoherence hadn't fooled Joe. But what cruel game was Atlas playing? Whatever it was, Battaglia suspected that behind it all was the coldly rational manipulation of the Brazilian Demoralization Force.

Simon couldn't get over that thump he'd heard at the bottom of the cargo shaft. So later that day, when he went on shift and was assigned to the crew moving a shuttle load of equipment up in the axis, he took the opportunity of a ten-minute break (union regs) to sneak over to the head of the uncompleted elevator. He felt a little nervous, for though he had spent many of

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his off hours touring the colony and getting familiar with its immense complexity, he had never wasted shift time to do it. But he didn't think anyone had made anything of his wandering off.

The north and south doors to the shaft were unpowered and locked like the one at the bottom, but walking around the side of the structure, Simon saw that the door to the winch room was slightly ajar and the interior light was on. He easily pulled himself up, delighted by the feeling of power the low gravity gave him, and cautiously stepped inside, unclipping his utility light from his belt. The trapdoor to the shaft was open. The whole situation was decidedly strange. Someone had been up here and had been careless at whatever he was doing. Simon's curiosity grew, tinged with a bit of excitement. He knelt over the gaping hole and peered into the darkness. Beyond ten meters or so, the shaft faded into the gloom. He aimed his light downward. Though it was designed for use in space and so was much brighter than an ordinary light, he had little hope of being able to make out anything so far away as on the bottom of the shaft. He hovered tensely over the brink, the beam of light quivering despite his attempt to hold it steady.

"What are you doing?" a gruff voice demanded from behind him.

Simon jumped a foot. The light slipped from his fingers, and in trying to catch it, he almost fell into the shaft himself. In dismay he watched it fall away below, then nervously turned and stood.

"How are things in Minas Gerais?" Joseph Battaglia asked him. He smiled wickedly.

What?"

"Sao Paulo? Rio de Janeiro? Or perhaps you've heard of Sao Joao del Rey? That's where BDF headquarters is."

Arglos stared at him blankly. He never really liked Battaglia. Maybe it was the crummy job he had. Always watching everybody, even though he was supposed to be on your side.

"You're making a mistake. I'm from Pocatello."

"Right, kid. And I had a sex-change operation when I was fifteen." Immediately, a pained expression crossed Battaglia's face.

In his overwrought state, he'd just let slip the secret he'd vowed would never pass his lips.

A city in space. A huge cylindrical city a kilometer and a half long, each half rotating in step with the other, locked together by a central hub of zero gravity. Forty-five constricted shells. Great mechanized factories producing useless products, monstrosities of

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science and degraded junk. Parklands carefully tended for the rich, kept jealously under lock and key. Two hundred thousand cramped inhabitants: bored workers, clever scientists, dilettante artists, pompous scholars, famous athletes. All of them contending in the new world. Ridden with government, ungoverned. A rigid environment, with steel walls all round. A balance of ignorance and power. Time for work, time for secrets, time for ambition, time for desperation.

Sarah lived there. She was dying by inches. She had only to lie back to fall into its corruption.

She woke up.

Sarah Hirsch — divine Sarah, dark, mysterious Sarah, designer of Lagrange I, inspirational leader, calm, self-possessed of mind and body — tended her frazzled nerves and tried to breathe normally. She played unconsciously with the electronic key in her left hand as she walked along the corridor that curved upward ever so gently before her.

He's probably dead; I'm sure he's dead, she thought — but what if he wasn't?

This huge creation, the first real space colony, one of the most remarkable achievements of the hand and mind of man (though the Brazilians said they would do better) — was her triumph. She had worked and dreamed to make these walls, this air, this environment that would always be clean because totally closed. She had put up with tremendous frustrations in order to see her dream complete.

And now the fools were going to corrupt it.

The discovery of the government's plans for Lagrange I — plans they had carefully managed to keep from her by the subtlest of misdirections — had sent her into a thick fog of despair and rage. She did not know which way was up anymore. She'd spent the last week sleepwalking through her nightmare. They would let the colony be completed and occupied — but the zero-g industrial facilities that would be the most extensive ever established, capable of true, efficient mass production of products difficult or impossible to create on earth, would be set to the production of satellites with high energy proton weapons. Weapons, the "experts" said, would permanently secure a military advantage for the fading United States of America. The hopeless arms race perpetuated into the universe.

Cretin dogs.

It was her creation. It was hers to destroy. That was why she had bashed Vincent Castle in the head with his own welder, cut his straps and watched him sail into the void.

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That was why she had kicked Muhammed Little down the rabbit hole. What a terrible wonderland, cut loose of all certainty, she had fallen into.

Little had cried out when she'd hit him. He had not been unconscious as he fell away, and she had seen his quick reaction to his predicament before he had disappeared into the darkness. Suppose he had managed to break his fall and was lying with a broken leg, alive, at the bottom of the shaft, waiting to be found to point the bloody finger at her! The remote possibility had tormented her, until she had decided to find out once and for all.

Sarah reached the double doors of the elevator with their crudely stenciled sign. Making sure no one was in sight up or down the corridor, she inserted the key into the triangular notch below the touchplate, opened the doors, stepped in, and quickly closed them again. She had momentarily glimpsed the man lying there in the light. Now she turned on her pocket flash and directed it at the body.

The corpse. Muhammed Little would not be pointing any bloody fingers. His torso was twisted grotesquely from his hips, and his skull was crushed. Dried blood was crusted in his hair. Instead of relief, Sarah felt horror. He looked like he had been a handsome man. He looked like Atlas.

The pain of that forced her to snap off the light. Atlas! What would Atlas think if he knew? Atlas, whom she loved with a passion that she had felt was a hopeless one from the start. Who knows where the heart leads us? Who could say what Atlas truly felt?

"What are you doing?" a gruff voice demanded from very far away. It was the whisper of a ghost. Her heart leapt wildly; then she realized that someone was up at the top of the shaft. She heard distant voices, and a faint, strangely flickering light played upon her.

Sarah peered upward, and Simon Arglos' tumbling utility light hit her squarely in the bridge of the nose, driving a splinter of bone into her brain and killing her instantly.

Atlas Cuthberton paced the lounge of his comparatively lavish suite of rooms, rooms that would one day house a family of six. He had already smoked three Free Fall joints ("It's peaceful here in Free Fall country"), but his problems had not seemed to lessen. In fact, he was bumming out. Whom could he trust? Battaglia? Sarah? Creeping up on him was the disheartening idea that perhaps, just perhaps, Castle's murder was justified. He knew Sarah would die if he sug-

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gested it, but maybe Castle's aliens were watching, and maybe they had decided to step in.

He shook off the paranoid dope dream and went into the bathroom to splash some cold water on his face. He looked at himself in the mirror. Was his skin slightly paler than usual?

"White man, white man!" he cursed and turned away.

Though electromagnetic forces were of course familiar to them, the Tied'ur, from the star we call Formalhaut B, had never invented radio. Had you described it to them, they would have considered it a silly idea. So it was that the noisy radio babbling of the earth went unheard, and their first contact with humanity occurred on the very doorstep of the planet, 400,000 kilometers away, when their approaching ship encountered the asphixiated corpse of Vincent Castle.

They gently drew the space-suited body into their craft and attempted to communicate, with no success. Bol'ur suggested that perhaps the creature was in time-suspension, but tests showed this not to be so. Certain creatures on their home world had the custom of growing fur in response to climatic changes; perhaps this creature was growing stillness in a like manner? Li'nann, currently of the third sex, thought this was unlikely. Presently they decided to call in a Dreamer.

The Dreamer, a contentious and popular being, came in and immediately fell asleep. After a time he stirred again and began to speak.

"An interesting entity, this," he said gently, entwining his tendrils with the gloved fingers of Vincent Castle, "Indeed, a unique one. First of all, this integument is artificial; in fact, it is a kind of vessel."

"No!" his colleagues exclaimed.

"Yes. It was a clear vision." The Dreamer removed Castle's battered helmet, and the sour stink of him spread rapidly through the chamber. His head lolled back, sightless eyes staring.

"Perceive!" Li'nann said. "It is trying to communicate!"

"No," said the Dreamer. "This is a decidedly organic creature. It is trying to decompose."

The others gleamed in surprise.

"An organic creature is no more than a beast," said Ur'un, who was acknowledged by all as the most perfectly average.

"A beast?" replied the Dreamer. "Yes, like a beast, this one claws at the world. He has set off into the deeps in this most pitiful of vessels, totally unprepared for

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the rigors of emptiness. I have dreamt with him. Through the muddle I heard him complain on the loss of something he held vital. He and his kind are indeed like simple breasts.

"He is pitifully unprepared. He is not alive. Yet he dreams.

"I cannot say a final word on this matter."

And so the Tied'ur, gentlest and most gracious of beings, left Vincent Castle to continue his dreaming journey.

In Simon Arglos' opinion, Joseph Battaglia had to be going crazy. Or maybe there was something deeper going on. Simon was beginning to suspect that there was more to the distribution of power in Lagrange I than met the eye of an honest rigger. Battaglia had suddenly gone mum after the beginning of their talk, had looked doubtful and turned away. When Simon, anxious to clear his name, had pressed, Battaglia had challenged him to deny that he knew about the message that the computer had displayed after Castle's death. "Just like a cretin dog." Simon of course knew nothing, but saying so had only caused Battaglia to mumble some threat and leave.

Now, off shift, Arglos prowled the corridors of the colony and brooded. Should he go to Mr. Cuthberton? After all, someone had to tell him what was going on. But the memory of the coordinator's stern brown face made that alternative seem unattractive. How about Sarah Hirsch? She was the only person in a position of influence who was not in the normal chain of command. She was the ideal choice.

But there was a problem in that, too: he was for sure in love with her. Just seeing her made him feel like he was fourteen years old again, mooning over Mary Lou Malinowski in English class. He knew it was ridiculous, but his feelings about Sarah Hirsch and his idealistic vision of space colonization where somehow wrapped around each other, which only made the prospect of approaching her more forbidding. But then he thought, if I *could...she* would be the one to understand. The world was a foul place; men seldom lived up to their ideals; the history of the human race was as filled with failures as triumphs. It had upset him long before to realize this, on top of his father droning on about "original sin" — but it had only made him madder, more determined. People could do better. They *had* made progress, and the ones who ignored that were the blind ones. That was why space was so important. It was a new chance, and Simon had faith in it. He knew

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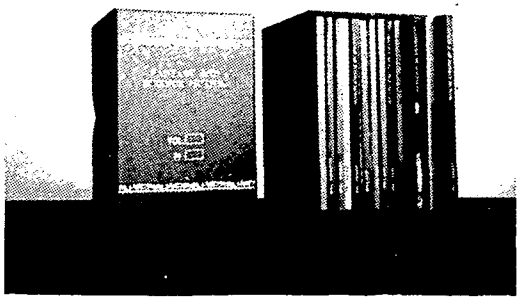
instinctively that Sarah Hirsch felt the same way, and that was why his passion for her had grown so large it had almost become a stumbling block to his expressing it. Love, the brightness to come, the future — they were all the same thing.

Simon had by this time wandered down to Level 45, and he came upon the elevator shaft that had contributed to his problems. The stenciled sign had come awry and hung by one corner, and with some puzzlement he saw that there was a key in the electronic lock! Who would be so careless as to leave it there?

It was his opportunity to pick up his utility light and at last to solve the mystery of the strange thump. He grinned at his own curiosity — like a damned cat. If I have seen farther than other men, said Newton, it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants.

Simon thumbed the touchplate, the doors slid open, and the light of the corridor fell in upon the dead.



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PROXIMA

I made the *New Yorker* once.

Not I, actually, but a reviewer for some Alabama newspaper who accomplished the feat on my account. He was reviewing a book of mine and in the review said something to this effect —

"Isaac Asimov types 90 words a minute and it is to this that he attributes much of his profligacy."

Someone then sent that to the *New Yorker,* with the comment: "So do we, but we are the soul of decorum, nevertheless."

I laughed when I saw it because it was an example of the errors made by those good souls who like to use a level of vocabulary to which they cannot truly aspire. What the reviewer meant to say was that it was to my typing speed that I attributed much of my "prolificacy."

"Prolificacy" would refer to my prodigious output, the existence of which I admit, and which has an obvious connection with speed-typing. "Profligacy" refers to my dissolute conduct, the existence of which I don't choose to admit, and which, in any case, has no connection at all with speed-typing (except that it might leave me some spare time).

Within a week of its appear-

ISAAC ASIMOV

Science

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ance, though, I received five copies of the *New Yorker* item, each carefully clipped out, from each of five different acquaintances — each of the five being young women of surpassing beauty. I'm not sure of the significance of that.

The incident does bring to mind the loose use of words even by those whose vocabulary has ample scope for the purpose in hand.

To discover something is to bring to light an object that was already in existence. To invent something is to produce something that has never existed before. The American continents can be discovered but not invented.

Yet can we speak of "the discovery of America by Columbus"? Granted that America already existed, was it previously unknown and did Columbus first bring it to light?

Of course not. There were Indians on the spot watching Columbus "discover" America. The ancestors of the Indians (undoubtedly Siberian natives) had discovered the American continents in a process that began some 25,000 years before Columbus — or before the Vikings or Irish or Phoenicians or any other Europeans you prefer.

What Columbus did was to be the head of the first expedition that brought the American continents to the permanent attention of *Europe,* nothing more. It's just the taken-for-granted racism of Westerners that makes it seem that discoveries only count when Europeans or people of European descent make them.

One would make the same solecism if one were to speak of the discovery of a ninth-magnitude star in 1916.

By 1916, the sky had been pretty well photographed down to the ninth-magnitude, so that every ninth-magnitude star was on some photographic plate or other. They were all there to be looked at, and it would be difficult to prove that one astronomer had happened to glance at a particular speck of light earlier than another. Even the routine plotting of positions of this speck or that doesn't seem terribly significant.

But then, every star has properties of its own, and a number of them have extraordinary properties. A star with a particular extraordinary property stands out from all the rest and gains an individual distinction. In that sense, the discoverer of that property can almost be said to discover that star — as an individual — and yet that is still loose use of the language.

There is, for instance, a star that has been known as "Barnard's star"

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since 1916, and one might easily assume that the American astronomer Edward Emerson Barnard had discovered the star. In fact, just to show you I'm not assuming a virtue I don't possess, I fell into the trap myself. In my book, *Asimov's Biographical Encyclopedia of Science and Technology* (Doubleday 1972), I say, "In 1916, Barnard discovered a dim star —"

In my more recent book, *Alpha Centauri, the Nearest Star* (Lothrop, 1976) I was more precise, however, and said, "...in 1916, Edward Emerson Barnard noted the...rapid proper motion of a star... Although many had noted the star before, it was Barnard who first pointed out its proper motion, and it is therefore called 'Barnard's star' in his honor."

There! That's the right way to say it.

What's so remarkable about noting a rapid proper motion (that is, the drift, with time, of a star against the general background of the other stars)?

Well, there are something like 130,000 ninth-magnitude stars in the sky, and if you were to try to study each one carefully in order to note some unusual property, you would find the work very time consuming and tedious and, on the whole, very unrewarding. What usually happens is that something out-of-the-way about some star happens to catch the eye of an observer, more or less by accident, and if he is quick enough to grab on to that and study it further, he may make an interesting discovery.

Thus, Barnard just happened to notice that the star we now call "Barnard's star" was out of position, and, by studying older star maps, he noticed there was a progressive change of position. He was then able to demonstrate that the star was moving at a rate of 10.30 seconds of arc per year against the background of the other stars.

This isn't fast in an absolute sense. It means that Barnard's star takes 181 years to move a distance equal to the apparent width of the full Moon. A casual observer looking at the sky and estimating the speed required to cross the Moon in 181 years would be forgiven if he thought that speed an unbearably slow creep. This happens, however, to be the fastest proper motion known for any star. The discovery proved so impressive to astronomers that the star is occasionally referred to as "Barnard's runaway star" or even "Barnard's arrow."

Three years earlier, in 1913, an eleventh-magnitude star had suddenly come into prominence. There are something like 1,200,000 eleventh-

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magnitude stars in the sky, so that to notice something extraordinary about one particular star among them is a markedly greater stroke of fortune than even Barnard was to have three years later. What's more the property in the case of the eleventh-magnitude star was an even more impressive one than the fast proper motion of Barnard's star.

Robert Innes, a British astronomer in South Africa, noticed that the eleventh-magnitude star was not where it was supposed to be, and, on checking into the matter, he found that the motion of the star was not progressive but cyclic. He was, in short, observing a parallax. This dim star was describing a tiny ellipse that mirrored the ellipse the Earth was making about the Sun. As the dim star is viewed against the starry background from an Earth that is moving in its orbit, the star is seen from progressively different directions and its apparent position shifts.

The parallax wasn't very large, The dim star shifted from its average position by an extreme of 0.762 seconds of arc, or about 1/2400 the apparent width of the Moon. This happened, however, to be the largest stellar parallax observed up to that time, or, for that matter, since that time.

Let's compare the matter of a large parallax with that of a fast proper motion.

A fast proper motion, such as that of Barnard's star, would indicate a very good chance that the star is quite close to us. There might, however, be stars closer to us that have smaller proper motions, because they just don't move very fast in an absolute sense, or because, while they move fast, that motion is more or less toward us or away from us, and we can only see the cross-wise, or transverse, component of that motion.

As a matter of fact, Barnard's star is close to us, but it is not the closest star. Barnard's star is 5.86 light-years away, and Alpha Centauri is only 4.40 light-years away, even though the latter has a proper motion only ¼ that of Barnard's star.

Parallax, however, is an unmistakable measure of distance. The larger the parallax, the smaller the distance of the star from ourselves, and there are no mitigating circumstances.

Innes's star, if I may call it that for a moment, has a parallax slightly larger than that of Alpha Centauri and it is, therefore, only 4.27 light years away. No star had ever before, or has ever since, been found to be closer to us than Innes's star (if you don't count the Sun itself, as a wise-guy 13-year-old once pointed out to me).

And here is a peculiar coincidence. Innes's star, which is just slightly

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closer to us than Alpha Centauri is, happens to be located quite close to Alpha Centauri in the sky — about 2° away. Innes's star is just about as far away from us as Alpha Centauri is, and it is in just about the same direction from us as Alpha Centauri is, that means it is not very far from Alpha Centauri in an absolute sense.

Innes's star is, in fact, only 0.16 light-years from Alpha Centauri.

In our section of the Galaxy, the average separation between neighboring stars is 7.6 light-years. To have two stars separated by only 0.16 light-years would be a fairly far-fetched coincidence, if there were no connection between the two — if they just happened to be passing another in a near miss at this particular time.

The distance is small enough, however, to make it possible to suppose that there is a gravitational connection. Alpha Centauri itself is a binary star, two stars rotating about a common center of gravity.* The larger, Alpha Centauri A, is almost precisely the twin of our own Sun in all respects. The smaller, Alpha Centauri B, has about seven-eighths the mass of our Sun. They circle each other in a period of 80 years.

Could it be that Innes's star is a third member of the group, circling the two chief stars in a vast orbit? In the years since Innes's discovery, Innes's star has been narrowly observed, and from its motion, it does appear possible that it may be circling Alpha Centauri A and B. It is now generally considered part of the Alpha Centauri system and is called Alpha Centauri C.

Because Alpha Centauri C is perceptibly closer to us than the other two stars of the system it is often called "Proxima Centauri" from the Latin word for "nearest." This is not a good name, however, for the nearness of Alpha Centauri C is only a function of its position in its orbit. Eventually, it will move beyond the two chief stars and will then be farther from us than they are.

If Alpha Centauri C is as close to us as the other two stars of the Alpha Centauri system, why is it so dim? Alpha Centauri A, if seen by itself, would be a first-magnitude star; Alpha Centauri B, if seen by itself, almost second-magnitude. Yet Alpha Centauri C, despite its closeness to us, is not even visible to the unaided eye.

To put it another way, Alpha Centauri A is almost exactly as luminous as the Sun, and Alpha Centauri B is 0.28 times as luminous as the Sun. Alpha Centauri C, however, is a red-dwarf star that is only 0.000053, or 1/19,000, as luminous as the Sun.

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*See STEPPING-STONES TO THE STARS (F&SF, October, 1960)

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Let's indulge in a fantasy; suppose that our Sun had a far distant red-dwarf companion just as its twin Alpha Centauri A.

Impossible, you say? We'd spot it in a minute? Well, let's see.

Let's imagine that such a star actually exists. We will call it Proxima, for if it existed it would truly and permanently be the nearest star to ourselves except for the Sun. What would it be like?

Suppose we make it just as far from the Sun as Alpha Centauri C is from Alpha Centauri A — 0.16 light years. That would mean Proxima was 1,500,000,000,000 kilometers (940,000,000,000 miles) from the Sun. It would be 205 times as far from the Sun as Pluto is, even at the latters farthest point of recession.

Imagine ourselves observing the skies from a point near our hypothetical Proxima. As far as the stars were concerned, all but one, there would be virtually no change from the appearance as seen from Earth. On the stellar scale, a shift in viewing position of 0.16 light-years is insignificant.

That "all but one" refers to the Sun itself, of course. The Sun would not be an object of overwhelming brilliance, but it would still be brighter than any other star. It would have a magnitude of just about -7, which would make it 150 times as bright as the next brightest star, Sirius.

At Proxima's great distance from the Sun, it would take an ordinary planet just about 1,000,000 years to make one circuit of the Sun. However, Proxima (if we suppose it to be as massive as Alpha Centauri C) would have a mass about one-fourth that of the Sun. The gravitational attraction would depend upon the sum of the masses, and so Proxima would move a bit faster than a planet would and would complete its circle in about 900,000 years.

And how would Proxima appear to us here on Earth?

Not very bright at all. It would be visible to the unaided eye, of course, but not overwhelmingly so. It would have a magnitude of about 3.5. There would be about 200 stars in the sky brighter than Proxima.

Nor would it look remarkable through a telescope. Proxima is a small star (if it is like Alpha Centauri C), only three times the diameter of Jupiter, and it would be a sixth of a light-year distant. Its apparent diameter at that distance would be only about a hundreth of a second of an arc and it would look like nothing more than a point of light in any of our telescopes. If it could be expanded into a visible orb that would attract attention, of course, and give it away — but it wouldn't be.

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How about its motion? After all, it's moving around the Sun and therefore should be moving in our sky. Would that be the tipoff?

It's average speed across the sky would be about 1.44 seconds of arc per year. At the end of each year it would be 1.44 seconds of arc farther east than it was at the beginning.

That's not much. Barnard's star has a proper motion that is over seven times as great. Alpha Centauri has a proper motion that is 2.5 times as great.

Why is this? If a star that is near to us is apt to have a large proper motion, why does not Proxima which is *so* near to us have an overwhelming proper motion?

The proper motion of the stars is the result of the fact that all the stars in our neighborhood are whipping around the Galactic center at great speeds. Our Sun moves in its Galactic orbit at a speed of 250 kilometers (155 miles) per second. If all the other stars were doing exactly the same, they would all seem motionless relative to ourselves.

The other stars are not, however, doing quite the same. Some are nearer the Galactic center and some farther. Where the Sun has a nearly circular orbit, some of the other stars have elliptical orbits. Some of the stars have orbits in planes that are tipped relative to the Sun's. All these factors, distance, ellipticity, orbital tilt, introduce differences in speed. It means that most of the stars have considerable velocities relative to the Sun and a few may have relative velocities of a couple of hundred kilometers per second. If these are close enough to the Sun and if the relative motion is cross-wise to our line of sight then this is reflected in a large proper motion.

In the case of Proxima, however, it would be moving around the Galactic center along with the Sun itself, and in exact step. It would seem motionless to us as far as the Galactic orbit were concerned.

What speed does exist relative to ourselves, is the speed of Proxima's orbital motion around the Sun, and this is a real creep. It is moving at a speed of only 0.33 kilometers (0.20 miles) per second. Even Proxima's relative closeness to ourselves can't make much out of that.

To be sure, Proxima's orbital motion would be a very uneven one. For a half a year, it would move west to east: starting from zero speed, increasing to a maximum after three months and falling to zero after six months. It would then reverse direction and move east to west for another half year: starting from zero, increasing to a considerably smaller maximum after three months and falling to zero after six months

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— then repeating. It takes two steps forward, one step back, two steps forward, one step back and so on.

The reason for this is that when the Earth is on the opposite side of the Sun from Proxima, it is moving in the direction opposite to that of Proxima and the two speeds are summed, so that Proxima seems to move particularly rapidly.

When Earth makes the turn and comes over on the same side of the Sun as Proxima is, it overtakes the much more slowly moving Proxima. Proxima therefore appears to be going backward, though at a slower rate than it had earlier been going forward.

As Proxima circles the sky in 900,000 years, it would appear to make 900,000 tiny loops, which would really amount to a very large parallax of about 20 seconds of arc — and that would prove its extreme closeness to our Sun.

But would those loops be noticed?

If someone bothered to compare Proxima's position in the sky with that in charts taken several decades ago, he would come up with an average proper motion of 1.44 seconds of arc per year, and it might never occur to him to examine that proper motion closely for periodic deviations.

Then, too, suppose Proxima's orbit were not in the general plane of the planetary orbits, as I have been assuming. There is no reason it should be. It might be moving in an orbit well-tipped to the plane of Earth's orbit and it might be located far outside the zodiac. Proxima might then be all the more apt to go unnoticed.

Since the planets all move through the constellations of the zodiac, those constellations get a great deal more routine attention than other constellations do. In addition, the effect of Earth's motion on Proxima if it were in an orbit highly inclined to our own would be to make it move not so much in loops as in very shallow tiny waves — 900,000 to each complete revolution. The waves would be less likely to be noticed casually than the loops would be, in my opinion.

But suppose someone were, quite by accident, to notice that Proxima was moving in loops or waves. Would the conclusion that it was a close companion of our star be inevitable?

Perhaps not.

Suppose the astronomer studying the motion was convinced that, like all other stars, Proxima was far away from us, say, several light-years away at the least. Might it not be possible that he would diagnose the

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looping or waving as the result of the existence of a companion to Proxima — a white dwarf, perhaps, or a massive planet?

Sirius and Procyon move with a kind of wavy motion, and each has a white-dwarf companion. Barnard's star moves with a small wobble and so does Barnard's star, and they are thought to have massive planets in consequence.

To be sure, one would have to deduce that Proxima's companion, whatever it was, would be circling Proxima in a period of exactly one year, but that could be put down to coincidence perhaps.

Even the fact that Proxima would be seen spectroscopically to be neither approaching us nor receding from us at any perceptible speed and, thanks to its small average proper motion, was keeping step with us almost exactly in our swim around the Galactic center, might be put down to coincidence, if the matter happened to be observed at all (which perhaps isn't likely).

There is another possible giveaway.

Proxima would not be revolving about the Sun, really. It and the Sun would be revolving about a common center of gravity.

Each planet revolves about the common center of gravity of itself and the Sun, but the mass of the Sun is so overwhelming that there isn't very much difference between the center of the Sun and the center of the Sun-planet center of gravity. The difference amounts to well over half a million kilometers in the case of Jupiter, but even that isn't very much.

Proxima, however, is one-fourth the mass of the Sun and is one-sixth of a light-year away. That means that the center of gravity of the Sun-Proxima system would be on a line connecting the centers of the two bodies, one-fourth of the way from the Sun to Proxima, and therefore 375,000,000,000 kilometers (235,000,000,000 miles) from the Sun.

The Sun and its entire family of orbiting objects, planets, satellites, asteroids, comets, debris, would be circling that point once every 900,000 years as they move in their 200,000,000 year circuit of the Galactic center.

This means that the Sun and its family moves in an orbit about the Galactic center made up of 220 shallow waves in every circuit. To us on Earth it will seem as though the rest of the Galaxy is waving slightly.

No one star, of course, is likely to reveal this apparent Galactic wave, since each will be having some irregularities of motion of its own, most likely. If the motions of many stars are averaged in a statistical manner,

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however, that average would show the waves. Rather than suppose that the whole Galaxy waves, we would surely conclude that the Sun was moving in a wavy orbit and deduce the presence of Proxima from that.

The wave is a long shallow one, however, very long in comparison with the history of science and very shallow in comparison to stellar distances. We have been observing stellar positions and motions with considerable accuracy for, say, 200 years, or 1/4,500 the length of one of those waves. That's not long enough for detection, I think.

Two more points.

It is suspected that the Sun has a shell of comets circling it at a distance of a light-year or two*, far beyond even the orbit of the hypothetical Proxima, and that some of them are perturbed by nearby stars and, as a consequence, drop into the inner Solar system and skim the Sun.

If Proxima existed, would it not have a much greater perturbing effect on the comet shell than any of the outer stars would? Could one deduce from the orbits of the long-period comets we detect (like Kohoutek's Comet) that Proxima exists or does not exist? If it exists, could we calculate where it might be now?

For that matter, would Proxima exert measurable perturbations on the orbits of the outer planets?

I don't know.

The second point arises out of the fact that I have been assuming that Proxima follows a circular orbit about the Sun, or, which is the same thing, that the two stars circle a common center of gravity in such a way as to be separated by a constant distance.

It's rather more likely that Proxima's orbit is markedly elliptical and that the separation between the two stars decreases and increases in a very slow rhythm.

It may be that the luck of the game puts humanity and its advanced astronomic instruments on Earth at a time when Proxima is just about at apastron; that is, at maximum distance from the Sun. Perhaps, over the next few hundred thousand years, Proxima will be approaching the Sun and ourselves steadily; growing steadily brighter and moving across the sky at a steadily increasing pace. Eventually, it would be impossible to miss.

See PLANET OF THE DOUBLE SUN (F&SF, June 1959)

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And during all the early Stone Age centuries, Proxima may have been receding steadily from the Sun, growing dimmer and moving more slowly until it became easy to miss.

Perhaps if we had come onto the scene a couple of hundred thousand years later — or a couple of hundred thousand years earlier —

So here it is in a nutshell.

It isn't likely that the Sun has a distant red-dwarf companion, but it just might.

If it does have a distant red-dwarf companion, it isn't likely that we would be missing the fact now in the 20th Century, but we just might.

Proxima might be out there and we might be overlooking it chiefly because it occurs to no one that it's there and no one's really searching for it.

Or is there some aspect of the situation that I've missed, and is there some giveaway that would so surely be spotted that in the absence of such spotting, we can be certain that nothing like Proxima exists?

Coming next month

Next month we begin a three-part serial that is the longest work ever published in F&SF. The novel is titled ON WINGS OF SONG; the author is Thomas M. Disch.

The story is set in a United States of the not-so-distant future where the east coast is overcrowded, impoverished and liberal and the Midwest is a reactionary police state, comfortable and secure. New technology has made possible out-of-body flight, provided that the user of the apparatus is able to sing with perfect artistry. The novel concerns the adventures and growth of Daniel Weinreb, who moves from New York City to Amesville, Iowa and then back to New York in search of that perfect artistry.

M. John Harrison has aptly described Thomas Disch as "a writer confident of his ability — a stylist, but one who has put pyrotechnic behind him — using the fantastic for his own purposes rather than allowing it to use him, going straight to the visible human world for his subject matter and evoking that world with grace, with wit, and, above all, with honesty." ON WINGS OF SONG is a wonderfully entertaining and illuminating novel; it is the major work of one of the fields' finest writers.

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Stephen Donaldson is the author of The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever *and wrote "The Lady in White" in our February 1978 issue. His work has been in the fantasy tradition, but this new story differs somewhat in that it projects a classic fantasy theme over the backdrop of a technocracy of the future.*

Mythological Beast

by STEPHEN R. DONALDSON

Norman was a perfectly safe, perfectly sane man. He lived with his wife and son, who were both perfectly safe, perfectly sane, in a world that was perfectly sane, perfectly safe. It had been that way all his life. So when he woke up that morning, he felt as perfect as always. He had no inkling at all of the things that had already started to happen to him.

As usual, he woke up when he heard the signal from the biomitter cybernetically attached to his wrist; and, as usual, the first thing he did was to press the stud which activated the biomitter's LED read-out. The display gleamed greenly for a moment on the small screen. As usual, it said, *You are OK.* There was nothing to be afraid of.

As usual, he had absolutely no idea what he would have done if it had said anything else.

His wife, Sally, was already up. Her signal came before his so that she would have time to use the bathroom and get breakfast started. That way, there would be no unpleasant hurrying. He rolled out of bed promptly and went to take his turn in the bathroom so that he would not be late for work and his son, Enwell, would not be late for school.

Everything in the bathroom was the same as usual. Even though Sally had just used it, the vacuum-sink was spotless. And the toilet was as clean as new. He could not even detect his wife's warmth on the seat. Everything was pefectly safe, perfectly sane. His reflection in the mirror was the only thing that had changed.

The tight lump in the center of his forehead made no sense to him. He had never seen it before. Automatically, he checked his biomit ter, but again it said, *You are OK.* That seemed true enough. He did

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not feel ill — and he was almost the only person he knew who knew what "ill" meant. The lump did not hurt in any way. But still he felt vaguely uneasy. He trusted the biomitter. It should have been able to tell him what was happening.

Carefully, he explored the lump. It was as hard as bone. In fact, it seemed to be part of his skull. It looked familiar; and he scanned back in his memory through some of the books he had read until he found what he wanted. His lump looked like the base of a horn or perhaps the nub of a new antler. He had seen such things in books.

That made even less sense. His face wore an unusual frown as he finished in the bathroom. He returned to the bedroom to get dressed and then went to the kitchen for breakfast.

Sally was just putting his food on the table — the same juice, cereal, and soyham that she always served him — a perfectly safe meal that would give him energy for the morning without letting him gain weight or become ill. He sat down to eat it as he always did. But when Sally sat down opposite him, he looked at her and said, "What's this thing on my forehead?"

His wife had a round bland face, and its lines had slowly become blurred over the years. She looked at his lump vaguely, but there was no recognition in her eyes. "Are you OK?" she said.

He touched the stud of his biomitter and showed her that he was OK.

Automatically, she checked her own biomitter and got the same answer. Then she looked at him again. This time, she, too, frowned. "It shouldn't be there," she said.

Enwell came into the kitchen, and Sally went to get his breakfast. Enwell was a growing boy. He watched the food come as if he were hungry, and then he began to eat quickly. He was eating too quickly. But Norman did not need to say anything. Enwell's biomitter gave a low hum and displayed in kind yellow letters: *Eat more slowly.* Enwell obeyed with a shrug.

Norman smiled at his son's obedience, then frowned again. He trusted his biomitter. It should be able to explain the lump on his forehead. Using the proper code, he tapped on the face of the display, *I need a doctor.*. A doctor would know what was happening to him.

His biomitter replied, *You are OK.*

This did not surprise him. It was standard procedure — the biomitter was only doing its job by reassuring him. He tapped again, *I need a doctor.* This time, the green letters said promptly, *Excused*

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from work. Go to Medical Building room 218.

Enwell's biomitter signaled that it was time for him to go to school. "Got to go," he mumbled as he left the table. If he saw the lump on his father's forehead, he did not think enough about it to say anything. Soon he had left the house. As usual, he was on time.

Norman rubbed his lump. The hard bone nub made him feel uneasy again. He resisted an urge to recheck his biomitter. When he had finished his breakfast, he said good-by to Sally, as he always did when he was going to work. Then he went out to the garage and got into his mobile.

After he had strapped himself in, he punched the address of the Medical Building into the console. He knew where the Medical Building was, not because he had ever been there before (in fact, no one he knew had ever been there), but because it was within sight of the National Library, where he worked. Once the address was locked in, his mobile left the garage smoothly on its balloon tires (a perfectly safe design), and slid easily into the perfectly sane flow of the traffic.

All the houses on this street were identical for a long way in either direction, and as usual Norman paid no attention to them. He did not need to watch the traffic, since his mobile took care of things like that. His seat was perfectly comfortable. He just relaxed in his safety straps and tried not to feel concerned about his lump until his mobile deposited him on the curb outside the Medical Building.

This building was much taller and longer than the National Library; but, apart from that, the two were very much alike. Both were empty except for the people who worked there; and the people worked there because they needed jobs, not because there was any work that needed to be done. And both were similarly laid out inside. Norman had no trouble finding his way to room 218.

Room 218 was in the Iatrogenics Wing. In the outer office was a desk with a computer terminal very much like the one Norman used at the library, and at the desk sat a young woman with yellow hair and confused eyes. When Norman entered her office, she stared at him as if he were sick. Her stare made him touch his lump and frown. But she was not staring at his forehead. After a moment, she said, "It's been so long — I've forgotten what to do."

"Maybe I should tell you my name," he said.

"That sounds right," she said. She sounded relieved. "Yes, I think that's right. Tell me your name."

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He told her. She looked around the terminal, then pushed a button to engage some kind of program.

"Now what?" he said.

"I don't know," she said. She did not seem to like being so confused.

Norman did not know, either. But almost at once the door to the inner office opened. The woman shrugged, so Norman just walked through the doorway.

The inner office had been designed to be cozy, but something had gone wrong with its atmospherics, and now it was deep in dust. When Norman sat down in the only chair, he raised the dust, and the dust made him cough.

"I'm Dr. Brett," a voice said. "You seem to have a cough."

The voice came from a console that faced the chair. Apparently, Dr. Brett was a computer who looked just like the Director of the National Library. Norman relaxed automatically. He naturally trusted a computer like that. "No," he said. "It's the dust."

"Ah, the dust," the computer said. "I'll make a note to have it removed." His voice sounded wise and old and very rusty. After a moment, he went on. "There must be something wrong with my scanners. You look healthy to me."

Norman said, "My biomitter says I'm OK."

"Well, then my scanners must be right. You're in perfect health. Why did you come?"

"I have a lump on my forehead."

"A lump?" Dr. Brett hummed. "It looks healthy to me. Are you sure it isn't natural?"

"Yes." For an instant, Norman felt unnaturally irritated. He touched the lump with his fingers. It was as hard as bone — no, harder, as hard as steel, magnacite. It was as hard as tung-diamonds. He began to wonder why he had bothered to come here.

"Of course, of course," the doctor said. "I've checked your records. You weren't born with it. What do you think it is?"

The question surprised Norman. "How should I know? I thought you would tell me."

"Of course," said the computer. "You can trust me. I'll tell you everything that's good for you. That's what I'm here for. You know that. The Director of the National Library speaks very highly of you. It's in your records."

The machine's voice made Norman's irritation evaporate. He trusted his biomitter. He trusted Dr. Brett. He settled himself in the chair to hear what his lump was. But even that amount of movement raised the dust. He sneezed twice.

Dr. Brett said, "You seem to have a cold."

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"No," Norman said. "It's the dust."

"Ah, the dust," Dr. Brett said. "Thank you for coming."

"'Thank you for —'?" Norman was surprised. All at once, he felt very uneasy. He felt that he had to be careful. "Aren't you going to tell me what it is?"

"There's nothing to worry about," the doctor said. "You're perfectly healthy. It will go away in a couple of days. Thank you for coming."

The door was open. Norman stared at the computer. The director did not act like this. He was confused. But he did not ask any more questions. Instead, he was careful. He said, "Thank you, Doctor," and walked out of the office. The door closed behind him.

The woman was still sitting at the outer desk. When she saw Norman, she beckoned to him. "Maybe you can help me," she said.

"Yes?" he said.

"I remember what I'm supposed to do now," she said. "After you see the doctor, I'm supposed to get his instructions" — she tapped the console — "and make sure you understand them. But nobody's ever come here before. And when I got this job, I didn't tell them" — she looked away from Norman — "that I don't know how to read."

Norman knew what she meant. Of course, she could read her biomitter — everybody could do that. But except for that, reading was not taught anymore. Enwell certainly was not learning how to read in school. Reading was not needed anymore. Except for the people at the National Library, Norman was the only person he knew who could actually read. That was why no one ever came to use the library.

But now he was being careful. He smiled to reassure the woman and walked around the desk to look at her console. She tapped the display to activate the read-out.

At once, vivid red letters sprang across the screen. They said:

SECRET CONFIDENTIAL PRIVATE PERSONAL SECRETcy UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES REPEAT UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES SHOW THIS DIAGNOSIS TO PATIENT OR REVEAL ITS CONTENTScyclecycle

Then there was a series of numbers that Norman did not understand. Then the letters said:

ABSOLUTE PRIORITY TRANSMIT AT ONCE TO GENERAL HOSPITAL EMERGENCY DIVISION REPEAT EMERGENCYc DIVISION ABSOLUTE PRIORITY cyclecyclecyclec

this to the hospital." Her hand moved toward the buttons that would send the message.

Norman caught her wrist. "No," he said. "That isn't what it means. It means something else."

The woman said, "Oh."

The bright red letters said:

DIAGNOSIS cyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecy PATIENT SUFFERING FROM MASSIVE GENETIC BREAKDOWN OF INTERMEDIATE ORIGIN COMPLETE REPEAT COMPLETE STRUCTURAL TRANSITION IN PROGRESS TRANSMUTATION IRREVERSIBLEcyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclec PROGNOSIScyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecy PATIENT WILL BECOME DANGEROUS HIMSELF AND WILL CAUSE FEAR IN OTHERS REPEAT WILL CAUSE FEAR TREATMENT cyclecyclecyclecyclec STUDY RECOMMENDED BUT DESTRUCTION IMPERATIVE REPEAT IMPERATIVE REPEAT IMPERATIVE EFFECT SOONESTcyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecy

"What did it say?" the woman said.

For a moment, Norman did not answer. His lump was as hard as a magnacite nail driven into his skull. Then he said, "It said I should get some rest. It said I've been working too hard. It said I should go to the hospital if I don't feel better tomorrow." Before the woman could stop him, he pressed the buttons that erased the terminal's memory. The terminal was just like the one he used in the National Library, and he knew what to do. After erasing, he programmed the terminal to cancel everything that had happened today. Then he fed in a cancel program to wipe out everything in the terminal. He did not know what good that would do, but he did it anyway.

He expected the woman to try to stop him, but she did not. She had no idea of what he was doing.

He was sweating, and his pulse was too fast. He was so uneasy that his stomach hurt. That had never happened to him before. He left the office without saying anything to the woman. His knees were trembling. As he walked down the corridor of the Iatrogenics Wing, his biomitter was saying in blue reassuring letters, *You will be OK. You will be OK.*

Apparently, his erasures were successful. In the next few days, nothing happened to him as a result of Dr. Brett's report. By the time he had returned home from the Medical Building, his read-out had regained its placid green, *You are OK.*

He did this deliberately. He did not feel OK. He felt uneasy. But he did not want his biomitter to send him to the General Hospital. So while his mobile drove him home,

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he made an effort to seem OK. The touch of his lump gave him a strange reassurance, and after a while his pulse, blood-pressure, respiration, reflexes had become as steady as usual.

And at home everything seemed perfectly sane, perfectly safe. He woke up every morning at the signal of his biomitter, went to work at the signal of his biomitter, ate lunch at the signal of his biomitter. This was reassuring. It reassured him that his biomitter took such good care of him. Without it, he might have worked all day without lunch, reading, sorting the mountain of discarded books in the storeroom, feeding them into the reference computer. At times like that, his uneasiness went away. He went home again at the end of the day at the signal of his biomitter.

But at home his uneasiness returned. Something was happening inside him. Every morning, he saw in the mirror that his lump was growing. It was clearly a horn now — a pointed shaft as white as bone. It was full of strength. When it was more than four inches long, he tested it on the mirror. The mirror was made of glasteel so that it would never shatter and hurt anybody. But he scratched it easily with the tip of his horn. Scratching it took no effort at all.

And that was not the only change. The soles of his feet were growing harder. His feet seemed to be getting shorter. They were starting to look like hooves.

Tufts of pure white hair as clean as the sky were sprouting from the backs of his calves and the back of his neck. Something that might have been a tail grew out of the small of his back.

But these things were not what made him uneasy. And he was not uneasy because he was thinking that someone from the hospital might come to destroy him. He was not thinking that at all. He was being careful: he did not let himself think anything that might make his biomitter call for help. No, he was uneasy because he could not understand what Sally and Enwell were doing about what was happening to him.

They were not doing anything. They were ignoring the changes in him as if he looked just the same as always.

Everything was perfectly sane, perfectly safe, to them.

First this made him uneasy. Then it made him angry. Something important was happening to him, and they did not even see it. Finally at breakfast one morning he became too irritated to be careful. Enwell's biomitter signaled that it was time for him to go to school. He mumbled, "Got to go," and left the table. Soon he

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had left the house. Norman watched his son go. Then he said to Sally, "Who taught him to do that?"

She did not look up from her soyham. "Do what?" she said.

"Go to school," he said. "Obey his biomitter. We never taught him to do that."

Sally's mouth was full. She waited until she swallowed. Then she said, "Everybody does it."

The way she said it made his muscles tighten. A line of sweat ran down his back. For an instant, he wanted to hit the table with his hand — hit it with the hard flat place on the palm of his hand. He felt sure he could break the table.

Then his biomitter signaled to him. Automatically, he left the table. He knew what to do. He always knew what to do when his biomitter signaled. He went out to the garage and got into his mobile. He strapped himself into the seat. He did not notice what he was doing until he saw that his hands had punched in the address of the General Hospital.

At once, he canceled the address, unstrapped himself and got out of the mobile. His heart was beating too fast. His biomitter was saying without being asked, *Go to the Hospital. You will be OK.* The letters were yellow.

His hands trembled. But he tapped onto the display, *I am OK.* Then he went back into the house.

Sally was cleaning the kitchen, as she always did after breakfast. She did not look at him.

"Sally," he said. "I want to talk to you. Something's happening to me."

"It's time to clean the kitchen," she said. "I heard the signal."

"Clean the kitchen later," he said. "I want to talk to you. Something's happening to me."

"I heard the signal," she said. "It's time to clean the kitchen now."

"Look at me," he said.

She did not look at him. Her hands were busy wiping scraps of soyham into the vacuum-sink, where they were sucked away.

"Look at me," he said. He took hold of her shoulders with his hands and made her face him. It was easy. He was strong. "Look at my forehead."

She did not look at him. Her face screwed up into tight knots and ridges. It turned red. Then she began to cry. She wailed and wailed, and her legs did not hold her up. When he let her go, she sank to the floor and folded up into a ball and wailed. Her biomitter said to her in blue, *You will be OK. You will be OK.* But she did not see it. She cried as if she were terrified.

Norman felt sick in his stomach. But his carefulness had come back. He left his wife and went

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back to the garage. He got into his mobile and punched in an address only ten houses away down the road. His mobile left the garage smoothly and eased itself into the perfectly sane flow of the traffic. When it parked at the address he had given it, he did not get out. He sat in his seat and watched his house.

Before long, an ambulance rolled up to his house. Men in white coats went in. They came out carrying Sally in a stretcher. They loaded her carefully into the ambulance and drove away.

Because he did not know what else to do, he punched the address of the National Library into the console of his mobile and went to work. The careful part of him knew that he did not have much time. He knew (everyone knew) that his biomitter was his friend. But now he also knew that it would not be long before his biomitter betrayed him. The rebellion in his genes was becoming too strong. It could not stay secret much longer. And he still did not know what was happening to him. He wanted to use the time to find out, if he could. The library was the best place for him to go.

But when he reached his desk with its computer console like the one in Dr. Brett's outer office, he did not know what to do. He had never done any research before. He did not know anyone who had ever done any research. His job was to sort books, to feed them into the reference computer. He did not even know what he was looking for.

Then he had an idea. He keyed his terminal into the reference computer and programmed it for autoscan. Then he tapped in his question, using the "personal information" code which was supposed to keep his question and answer from tying up the general circuits of the library and bothering the director. He asked:

I have hooves, a tail, white hair, and a horn in the middle of my forehead. What am I?

After a short pause, the display ran numbers which told Norman his answer was coming from the 1976 *Encyclopedia Americana.* That encyclopedia was a century out of date, but it was the most recent one in the library. Apparently, people had not bothered to make encyclopedias for a long time.

Then the display said:

ANSWERcycleUNICORNcyclecycl
DATA FOLLOWScyclecyclecyclecy

His uneasiness became suddenly sharper. There was a sour taste in his mouth as he scanned the read-out.

THE UNICORN IS A MYTHOLOGICAL BEAST USUALLY DE-

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PICTED AS A LARGE HORSE WITH A SINGLE HORN ON ITS FOREHEADcyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyc

Sweat ran into his eyes. He missed a few lines while he blinked to clear his sight.

IT REPRESENTED CHASTITY AND PURITY THOUGH ITc WOULD FIGHT SAVAGELY WHEN CORNERED IT COULD BE TAMED BY A VIRGIN'S TOUCH IN SOME INTERPRETATIONS THE UNICORN IS ASSOCIATED WITH THE VIRGIN MARY IN OTHERS IT REPRESENTS CHRIST THE REDEEMERcyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecycl

Then, to his surprise, the display showed him a picture of a unicorn. It was prancing high on its strong clean legs, and its coat was pure as the stars, and its eyes shone. Its mane flew like the wind. Its long white horn was as strong as the sun. At the sight, all his uneasiness turned into joy. The unicorn was beautiful. It was beautiful. He was going to be beautiful. For a long time, he made the display hold that picture, and he stared at it and stared at it.

But after his joy receded a little and the display went blank, he began to think. He felt that he was thinking for the first time in his life. His thoughts were clear and necessary and quick.

He understood that he was in danger. He was in danger from his biomitter. It was a hazard to him. It was only a small thing, a metasensor that monitored his body for signs of illness; but it was linked to the huge computers of the General Hospital; and when his metabolism passed beyond the parameters of safety, sanity, his biomitter would summon the men in white coats. For the first time in his life, he felt curious about it. He felt that he needed to know more about it.

Without hesitation, he tapped his question into the reference computer, using his personal information code. He asked:

Origin of biomitter?

The display ran numbers promptly and began a read-out.

WORLDWIDE VIOLENCE CRIME WAR INSANITY OF 20TH CENTURY SHOWED HUMANS CAPABLE OF SELFEXTERMINATION OPERATIVE CAUSE WAS FEAR REPEAT FEAR RESEARCH DEMONSTRATED HUMANS WITHOUT FEAR NONVIOLENT SANEcyclec POLICE EDUCATION PEACE TREATIES INADEQUATE TO CONTROL FEAR OF INDIVIDUAL HUMANS BUT SANE INDIVIDUAL HUMANS NOT PRONE TO VIOLENCE WAR TREATIES POLICE WEAPONS UNNECESSARY IF INDIVIDUALS NOT AFRAIDcyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecy TREATMENTcyclecyclecyclecyclec BIOMITER MEDICOMPUTER NETWORK INITIATED FORc ALL INDIVIDUALS MONITOR

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PHYSIOLOGICAL SIGNS OF EMOTION STRESS ILLNESS CONDITIONED RESPONSES INBRED TO CONTROL BEHAVIOR FEAR***CROSSREFERENCE PAVLOV BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION SUBCONSCIOUS HYPNOTISMcyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecy SUCCESS OF BIOMITTER PROGRAM DEMONSTRATES FEAR DOES NOT EXIST WHERE CONTROL ORDER

Abruptly, the green letters flashed off the display, and the terminal began to read-out a line of red.

DATA CANCEL REPEAT CANCELcyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecy MATERIAL CLASSIFICATION RESTRICTED NOT AVAILABLE WITHOUT APPROVAL DIRECTOR NATIONAL LIBRARY FILE APPROVAL CODE BEFORE REACTIVATING REFERENCE PROGRAMcyclecyclecyclecyclecycl

Norman frowned around his horn. He was not sure what had happened. Perhaps he had accidentally stumbled upon information that was always restricted and had automatically triggered the reference computer's cancellation program. Or perhaps the director had just now succeeded in breaking his personal information code and had found out what he was doing. If the interruption had been automatic, he was still safe. But if the director had been monitoring him personally, he did not have much time. He needed to know.

He left his desk and went to the director's office. The director looked very much like Dr. Brett. Norman believed that he could break the director with one kick of his hard foot. He knew what to do. He said, "Director."

"Yes, Norman?" the director said. His voice was warm and wise, like Dr. Brett's. Norman did not trust him. "Are you OK? Do you want to go home?"

"I am OK," Norman said. "I want to take out some books."

"'Take out some books'?" the director said. "What do you mean?"

"I want to withdraw some books. I want to take them home with me."

"Very well," the director said. "Take them with you. Take the rest of the day off. You need some rest."

"Thank you," Norman said. He was being careful. Now he had what he wanted. He knew that the director had been watching him. He knew that the director had deliberately broken his personal information code. He knew that the director had transmitted his information to the General Hospital and had been told that he, Norman, was dangerous. No one was allowed to take books out of the National Library. It was forbidden to withdraw books. Always. Even

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the director could not override that rule, unless he had been given emergency programming.

Norman was no longer safe. But he did not hurry. He did not want the General Hospital to think that he was afraid. The men in white coats would chase him more quickly if they thought he was afraid of them. He walked calmly, as if he were perfectly safe, perfectly sane, to the stacks where the books were kept after they had been sorted and fed into the reference computer.

He did not try to be thorough or complete. His time was short. He took only the books he could carry, only the books he was sure he wanted: He took *The Mask, the Unicorn, and the Messiah;* the *Index to Fairy Tales, Myths, and Legends; Barbarous Knowledge;* the *Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology; The Masks of God;* and *The Book of Imaginary Beings.* He would need these books when his transformation was complete. They would tell him what to do.

He did not try to find any others. He left the National Library, hugging the books to his broad chest like treasure.

The careful part of him expected to have trouble with his mobile, but he did not. It took him home exactly as it always did.

When he entered his house, he found that Sally had not been brought back. Enwell had not come home. He did not think that he would ever see them again. He was alone.

He took off his clothes because he knew that unicorns did not wear clothes. Then he sat down in the living room and started to read his books.

They did not make sense to him. He knew most of the words, but he could not seem to understand what they were saying. At first he was disappointed in himself. He was afraid that he might not make a very good unicorn. But then he realized the truth. The books did not make sense to him because he was not ready for them. His transformation was not complete yet. When it was complete, he would be able to understand the books. He bobbed his horn joyfully. Then, because he was careful, he spent the rest of the day memorizing as much as he could of the first book, *The Book of Imaginary Beings.* He wanted to protect himself in case his books were lost or damaged.

He was still memorizing after dark, and he was not tired. His horn filled him with strength. But then he began to hear a humming noise in the air. It was soft and soothing, and he could not tell how long it had been going on. It was

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coming from his biomitter. It found a place deep inside him that obeyed it. He laid down on the couch and went to sleep.

But it was not the kind of sleep he was used to. It was not calm and safe. Something in him resisted it, resisted the reassuring hum. His dreams were wild. His emotions were strong, and one of them was uneasiness. His uneasiness was so strong that it must have been fear. It made him open his eyes.

All the lights were on in the living room, and there were four men in white coats around him. Each of them carried a hypogun. All the hypoguns were pointed at him.

"Don't be afraid," one of the men said. "We won't hurt you. You're going to be all right. Everything is going to be OK."

Norman did not believe him. He saw that the men were gripping their hypoguns tightly. He saw that the men were afraid. They were afraid of him.

He flipped off the couch and jumped. His legs were immensely strong. His jump carried him over the heads of the men. As he passed, he kicked one of the men. Blood appeared on his forehead and spattered his coat, and he fell down and did not move.

The nearest man fired his hypogun. But Norman blocked the penetrating spray with the hard flat heel of his palm. His fingers curled into a hoof, and he hit the man in the chest. The man fell down.

The other two men were trying to run away. They were afraid of him. They were running toward the door. Norman jumped after them and poked the nearest one with his horn. The man seemed to fly away from the horn. He crashed into the other man, and they both crashed against the door and fell down and did not move again. One of them had blood all over his back.

Norman's biomitter was blaring red: *You are ill. You are ill.*

The man Norman had punched was still alive. He was gasping for breath. His face was white with death, but he was able to tap a message into his biomitter. Norman could read his fingers. He was saying, *Seal the house. Keep him trapped. Bring nerve gas.*

Norman went to the man. "Why?" he said. "Why are you trying to kill me?"

The man looked at Norman. He was too close to dying to be afraid anymore. "You're dangerous," he said. He was panting, and blood came out of his mouth. "You're deadly."

"Why?" Norman said. "What's happening to me?"

"Transmutation," the man said. "Atavism. Psychic throwback. You're becoming something. Something that never existed."

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"'Never existed'?" Norman said.

"You must've been buried," the man said. "In the subconscious. All this time. You never existed. People made you up. A long time ago. They believed in you. Because they needed to. Because they were afraid."

More blood came out of his mouth. "How could it happen?" he said. His voice was very weak. "We put fear to sleep. There is no more fear. No more violence. How could it happen?" Then he stopped breathing. But his eyes stayed open, staring at the things he did not understand.

Norman felt a deep sorrow. He did not like killing. A unicorn was not a killing beast. But he had had no choice. He had been cornered.

His biomitter was shouting, *You are ill.*

He did not intend to be cornered again. He raised his wrist and touched his biomitter with the tip of his horn. Pieces of metal were torn away, and the bright blood ran down his arm.

After that, he did not delay. He took a slipcover from the couch and used it as a sack to carry his books. Then he went to the door and tried to leave his house.

The door did not open. It was locked with heavy steel bolts that he had never seen before. They must have been built into the house. Apparently, the men in white coats, or the medicomputers, were prepared for everything.

They were not prepared for a unicorn. He attacked the door with his horn. His horn was as hard as steel, as hard as magnacite. It was as hard as tung-diamonds. The door burst open, and he went out into the night.

Then he saw more ambulances coming down the road. Ambulances were converging on his house from both directions. He did not know where to run. So he galloped across the street and burst in the door of the house opposite his. The house belonged to his friend, Barto. He went to his friend for help.

But when Barto and his wife and his two daughters saw Norman, their faces filled with fear. The daughters began to wail like sirens. Barto and his wife fell to the floor and folded up into balls.

Norman broke down the back door and ran out into the service lane between the rows of houses.

He traveled the lane for miles. After the sorrow at his friend's fear came a great joy at his strength and swiftness. He was stronger than the men in white coats, faster than ambulances. And he had nothing else to be wary of. The medicomputers could not chase him themselves. With his biomitter gone, they could not

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even tell where he was. And they had no weapons with which to fight him except men in white coats and ambulances. He was free and strong and exhilarated for the first time in his life.

When daylight came, he climbed up onto the roofs of the houses. He felt safe there, and when he was ready to rest, he slept there alone, facing the sky.

He spent days like that — traveling the city, reading his books and committing them to memory — waiting for his transformation to be complete. When he needed food, he raided grocery stores to get it, though the terror of the people he met filled him with sorrow. And gradually his food-need changed. Then he did not go to the grocery stores anymore. He pranced in the parks at night and cropped the grass and the flowers and ran nickering among the trees.

And his transformation continued. His mane and tail grew thick and exuberant. His face lengthened, and his teeth became stronger. His feet became hooves, and the horny part of his hands grew. White hair the color of moonlight spread across his body and limbs, formed flaring tufts at the backs of his ankles and wrists. His horn grew long and clean and perfectly pointed.

His joints changed also and began to flex in new ways. For a time, this gave him some pain, but soon it became natural to him. He was turning into a unicorn. He was becoming beautiful. At times, there did not seem to be enough room in his heart for the joy the change gave him.

Yet he did not leave the city. He did not leave the people who were afraid of him, though their fear gave him pangs of a loneliness he had never felt before. He was waiting for something. There was something in him that was not complete.

At first, he believed that he was simply waiting for the end of his transformation. But gradually he came to understand that his waiting was a kind of search. He was alone — and unicorns were not meant to be alone, not like this. He was searching the city to see if he could find other people like him, people who were changing.

And at last one night he came in sight of the huge, high structure of the General Hospital. He had been brought there by his search. If there were other people like him, they might have been captured by the men in white coats. They might be prisoners in the Emergency Division of the hospital. They might be lying helpless while the medicomputers studied them, plotting their destruction.

His nostrils flared angrily at the thought. He stamped his foreleg.

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He knew what he had to do. He put his sack of books in a place of safety. Then he lowered his head and charged down the road to attack the General Hospital.

He broke down the front doors with his horn and pounded into the corridors. People fled from him in terror. Men and women grabbed hypoguns and tried to fire at him, but he flicked them with the power of his horn, and they fell down. He rampaged on in search of the Emergency Division.

The General Hospital was designed just like the Medical Building and the National Library. He was able to find his way without trouble. Soon he was among the many rooms of the Emergency Division. He kicked open the doors, checked the rooms, checked room after room. They were full of patients. The Emergency Division was a busy place. He had not expected to find that so many people were ill and dangerous. But none of them were what he was looking for. They were not being transformed. They were dying from physical or mental sickness. If any people like him had been brought here, they had already been destroyed.

Red rage filled his heart. He charged on through the halls.

Then suddenly he came to the great room where the medicomputers lived. Rank on rank, they stood before him. Their displays glared evilly at him, and their voices shouted. He heard several of them shout together, "Absolute emergency! Atmospheric control, activate all nerve gas! Saturation gassing, all floors!"

They were trying to kill him. They were going to kill everybody in the hospital.

The medicomputers were made of magnacite and plasmium. Their circuits were fireproof. But they were not proof against the power of his horn. When he attacked them, they began to burn in white fire, as incandescent as the sun.

He could hear gas hissing into the air. He took a deep breath and ran.

The gas was hissing into all the corridors of the hospital. Patients began to die. Men and women in white coats began to die. Norman began to think that he would not be able to get out of the hospital before he had to breathe.

A moment later, the fire in the medicomputers ignited the gas. The gas burned. Oxygen tanks began to explode. Dispensaries went up in flames. The fire extinguishers could not stop the intense heat of burning magnacite and plasmium. When the cylinders of nerve gas burst, they had enough force to shatter the floors and walls.

Norman flashed through the doors and galloped into the road

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with the General Hospital raging behind him like a furnace.

He breathed the night air deep into his chest and skittered to a stop on the far side of the road to shake the sparks out of his mane. Then he turned to watch the hospital burn.

At first he was alone in the road. The people who lived nearby did not come to watch the blaze. They were afraid of it. They did not try to help the people who escaped the flames.

But then he saw a young girl come out from between the houses. She went into the road to look at the fire.

Norman pranced over to her. He reared in front of her.

She did not run away.

She had a lump on her forehead like the base of a horn or the nub of a new antler. There was a smile on her lips, as if she were looking at something beautiful.

And there was no fear in her eyes at all.

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F&SF COMPETITION

REPORT ON COMPETITION 20

In the September issue we asked for a maximum of five classified ads from a newspaper of the future. A pretty good response, although many competitors had doubts that there would be any such things as newspapers in the future.

An irrelevant, but interesting footnote to the Miskatonic University ad below (under Runners-up) is that its contributor writes: "Every one of the courses listed for Miskatonic University really exists at the college where I teach. In fact, I teach one of them."

FIRST PRIZE

NOTICE: The Psychic Chess League will defeat the Clairvoyant Chess Association in a 20 game match next Spring. The final score will be PCL16-CCA4. The tournament book is now available, all games with notes. Key any bookmech or home reader, code CDFuture item 12.

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—Ron Daniel
Cincinnati

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—Hal Halvorsen
Silver Spring, Md.

SALE OF SURPLUS VEHICLES

Sealed bids will be received in the office of Gerald Biggy, assistant Deputy Superintendent, Trenton School District No. 365A, 27942 Alpha Subsector, 3rd Sublevel, Princeton district, Trenton city, New York Metrostate, until 3:30 pm, August 17, 2097. Bids may be submitted for any of the following vehicles: Three (3) BOLO MK III Model C Hallway Monitors (minimum acceptable bid Cr. 357,500). One (1) BOLO MK III Model B Hallway Monitor w/extensive damage to Infinite Repeaters due to Lunch Hour duty. (minimum acceptable bid Cr. 275000). Five (5) BOLO MK IV Model F Lunchroom Monitors (minimum acceptable bid Cr. 570,000). Vehicles may be inspected at Seldon Grade School, 34856 Gamma Subsector, 125h level, Princeton district, Trenton until July 17 and at Trenton School district No. 375A Garage and Heliport until August 17.

Questions relative to the bid or specifications should be directed to Harvey Martin, Director of Seldon Grade School department of Defense via compcomlink #7-923-A56-37466y.

The Board reserves the right to reject any or all bids or to accept the proposal deemed best for the district and to waive informalities.

Gerald Biggy
Asst. Deputy Superintendent

—George Allen
Ft. Carson, CO

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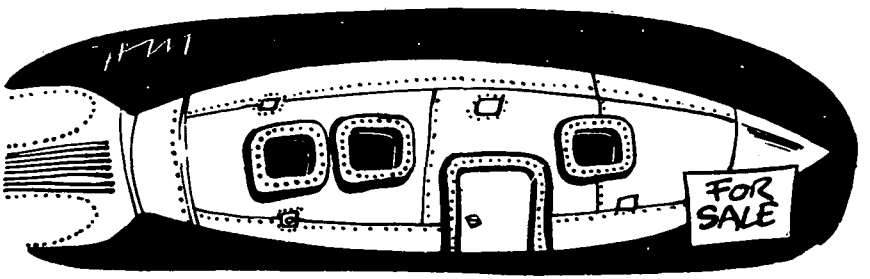
—Robert Post
Sylmar, Cal.

COMPETITION 21 (suggested by Craig Allshouse)

Let us see what strange and wonderful effects we can come up with by interposing sf titles in cliches, common sayings or familiar quotations, for example: When the going gets tough, the *Martians Go Home.* The way to a man's heart is through *The Mote in God's Eye.* Submit a maximum of a dozen of these items.

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56. Cornwall. Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by January 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, six different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks. Runners-up will receive one-year subscriptions to F&SF. Results of Competition 21 will appear in the May issue.



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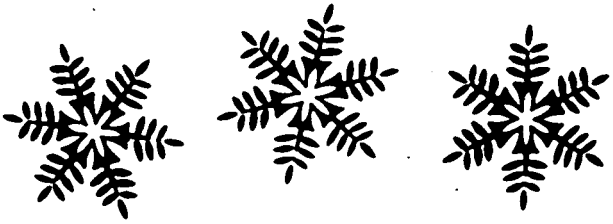

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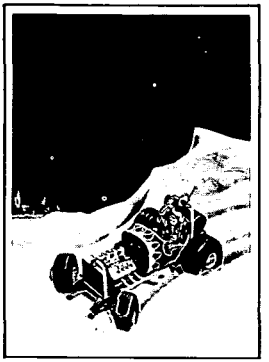

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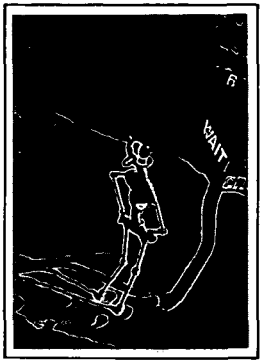

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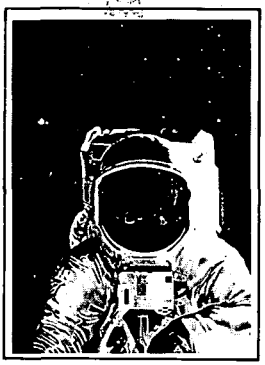

D

Full-color posters of four exceptional F&SF covers

These are not press proofs; they are a special small run of prints on quality, heavy stock. The quality of color reproduction exceeds that of the original printed covers. There is no overprinting, and they are suitable for framing (size: 9 x 11½).

$2.00 EACH; 3 FOR $5.00; 4 FOR $6.50

A - September 1968, Chesley Bonestell, "The Trifid Nebula."
B - January 1970, Mel Hunter, "Robot and dune buggy."
C - September 1970, Mel Hunter, "Robot at street crossing."
D - May 1971, Ron Walotsky, for "The Bear With the Knot On His Tail."

FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION, Box 56, Cornwall, Ct. 06753

I enclose $_____. Send me the following cover prints:
_____A _____B _____C _____D

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Add .50 for Canadian postage; $1.00 for other foreign countries.

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